

## Cyprian Fernandes: Who is Pio Gama Pinto book Editor Shiraz Durrani?

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### **Who is Shiraz Durrani?**

#### **Interview by Cyprian Fernandes**

[October 14, 2018](#)

Shiraz Durrani was born in Nairobi. He got his early schooling from City Primary School (Nairobi); Aga Khan Primary & Secondary School (Mombasa); Allidina Visram High School (Mombasa).

University of East Africa. Degree of Bachelor of Arts. 1968. Nairobi. Kenya.

Post Graduate Diploma in Librarianship (University of Wales, Aberystwyth).

Fellow of the [UK] Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (FCLIP). March, 1997.

Post Graduate Certificate with Distinction. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. 2007. London Metropolitan University.

He was awarded [UK] MBE in 2003 for “services to public libraries”.

**You have been passionate beyond the ordinary about Kenya’s early struggle against colonialism, why? How has this manifested itself?**

The issue is about being and seeing yourself as part of working people, not as members of the elites. It is about identifying with victims of exploitation and oppression. Of course, family and class positions count also. A critical mind which looks beyond the surface and challenges unfair

and unjust practice is relevant too. My attitudes and passions perhaps go back to early childhood and in this my father had a deep influence on me, though I did not always see this clearly. My father always challenged social, cultural and political customs and traditions where he felt these were unfair and exploitative. At the same time, he had a creative mind which always sought new challenges and was not satisfied with earning more and more money. He ran a printing press in Kisumu before I was born, and then ran a successful hardware business in Nairobi. The shop prospered in the early 1950s, with the demand for hardware hitting high because of the Korean War. But all this wealth did not satisfy him. He craved new and creative avenues for his energy and sold the business and invested all the money in a new venture - Durrani Productions, the first film making venture in East Africa. He visited India for technical support and equipment - and also various and European countries. The first film he undertook was called "Watan Se Door" (Far from homeland). He had a film studio in Dandora where the Nairobi Mayor launched the company in 1951/52 (?). There was a sound recording van and a sound studio in Ngara. But perhaps he was not a hard businessman and was swindled out of his money by crooked partners. He scaled down the film project and started a film in Kiswahili called "Mchawi" (traditional doctor) and set up a film studio in Dar es Salaam. Again, this did not take off and the family was reduced to relative poverty. These financial ups and downs probably influenced my political leanings. The left perspective in me was inculcated by wide readings – initially in Gujarati and I used to walk half an hour to go to Seif Bin Salim Library in Mombasa. I recall reading a book when I was in primary school entitled "Humanity's Gain from Disbelief" in the Thinkers Library bought from a secondhand bookshop. This was reinforced in later years by taking up Economics at A Levels with a very inspiring teacher who went on to write a book on the history of mathematics and became an important scholar in later life. The economics I learnt showed the reality behind the political economy of Kenya and encouraged critical, analytical outlook. I kept challenging school rules and we went on strike for having to wear ties - a colonial custom - in an independent Kenya. I also instigated a student strike in a private secondary school I was teaching temporarily after graduating as the students were given a very poor quality of education. A fellow teacher with me was expelled but I was spared as there were very few graduate teachers in the school.

Studying at the University of Nairobi reinforced my left leanings - with students going on strike almost every term. The series of public lectures in the Taifa Hall with Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others added to my people-orientated perspectives and perhaps offered a way to resolve social contradictions. When I started work in the Library of the University of Nairobi, I continued my left-leaning perspective on life and continued reading progressive books and magazines. A year-long stay in UK for studies in 1971-72 showed the two aspects of life in UK as in Kenya: a conservative political establishment, but a vibrant left-leaning perspective among student, particularly the foreign ones – as well as among some lecturers and other people I came into contact with. But all this remained theoretical. It was only when I came in touch with, and joined, the December Twelve Movement around 1970s that my thinking and actions got channeled into a clear path to socialism. Studying works by Marx, Mao, on Vietnam, Cuba provided theoretical and

practical understanding of the need for social change. Mao's writings *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* showed a new perspective to resolve social ills. But of course such material was banned in Kenya and so we had to set up our own underground libraries, many books from which are in the Ukombozi Library today. But issues around classes, class contradictions, class struggles and the anti-imperialist struggles around the world became my "normal" world outlook.

All this led me to read Kenya's history from a working class perspective. It was clear that history taught in schools and Universities was from the ruling class perspective, reinforcing imperialist perspectives. This was not the real history of Kenya. So began a search for Kenya's real history.

[1]

At a political level the manifestations were in the form of articles and magazines circulating underground aimed at cadres as well as publications such as newspapers, drama, booklets, circulars and leaflets for the public.

There were various ways in which this understanding and perspective manifested in my actions. The two perspectives I had were as a professional librarian and as a (short-term) teacher. Working in an academic library showed the contrast between the wealth of knowledge accumulated in libraries such as the Kabete Agriculture-Veterinary Library and the local peasant and workers who lived around the Campus. Disseminating relevant information was the first battle I had to win. I did this initially by writing articles which were published in local and international journals. Among the first article I published was one entitled "Relevant Library Service" and the search for relevance in information remains a life-long passion. I carried on such activities in public libraries in UK and in lecturing at London Metropolitan University. I set up new projects such as the Three Continents Liberation Collection at the C.L.R. James Library in Hackney and the Quality Leaders Projects – Youth at Merton and as a teaching and learning tool at the London Metropolitan University. Increasing awareness and widening perspectives among students and people were and remain my key objective.

**Just how well did you get to know the Mau Mau? Why the fascination. You have written extensively about Kenya's war against colonialism, who impressed you most about this process?**

I had no contact with any Mau Mau activist. But the perspective I got from history as taught and as prevalent in Kenya in those days condemned the movement as backward and primitive. Wider reading of the struggles in other countries - in Algeria, Angola, and Mozambique as well as in Latin America, China, and Vietnam - is what made me see Mau Mau as part of a world-wide movement of resisting colonialism and imperialism. The contrast of the two versions of history fascinated me. But what helped me understand this reality was alternative readings on ideas, experiences and perspectives. My introduction to Mau Mau was through reading stories by Mau Mau activities. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi" was especially inspiring, not only the play in print but the play on stage. Reading *Mau Mau From Within* by Donald Barnett and

Karari Njama was an eye opener, as were the three pamphlets edited by Donald Banner, *Mau Mau, the Hardcore and the Man in the Middle* (references in my books). These books should become compulsory reading in our schools, colleges and universities and should be made freely available at our public libraries.

I also organised the film, *Mau Mau*, at the Kabete Campus of the University of Nairobi as recorded in my book “*Progressive Librarianship*”: *Black Man’s Land* film trilogy, *White man’s country*, *Mau Mau* and *Kenyatta*. These were produced and directed by Anthony Howarth and David R. Koff and were written by David R. Koff. The significance of showing these films was that they were frowned upon by the KANU Government at the time and even the normal showing of the films was extremely difficult, if not impossible.

So the search for the real story of *Mau Mau* continued until the publication of the book “*Kenya’s War of Independence*” which sees *Mau Mau* in its historical and politic context. What is perhaps the most impressive aspect of *Mau Mau* is the fact that it was so advanced in its thinking and in its action - facts that are still not fully appreciated by the people of Kenya due to various forms of censorship. It flourished against a far superior political and military force, in an extremely hostile environment where death was just around the corner. Individual activists were prepared to sacrifice all in the interest of greater good for the society as a whole. Why an independent nation shies away from the most important part of its history remains an important question for Kenyans. I quote from “*Kenya Resists*” No. 1, *Mau Mau*:

Very few countries hide or obscure the significance of their most important historical achievements. Kenya has managed to do so without any regrets or even a thought about the implication of such a major oversight in connection with *Mau Mau* Resistance.

The reason for this underplay is not difficult to understand. The government that came to power at independence was not only not part of the *Mau Mau* movement which fought for land and freedom for working people, but actively opposed it. It sought – and was given by the departing colonial power – state power, land and freedom for its class, thereby sidelining the radical resistance movement and its activists. This elite then used its state power to ensure that the nation forgets its radical history which would have alerted future generations to the theft of their inheritance and country.

And what attracts me to *Mau Mau*, besides its brilliance in so many fields, is the lessons it teaches for today’s problems in Kenya. It is these lessons that are being denied to working people.

**You have also written about the enigmatic *Mau Mau* leader Dedan Kimaathi, who did he attract your passionate investigative gaze? What impressed you most about him?**

Here was a leader vilified by his imperialist enemies, murdered by colonialists and written out of official histories of Kenya. That in itself shows the class divide in the country for Kimathi is not forgotten by workers, peasants and particularly by young people today. I regret that I have not been able to write about Kimathi the person, the leader of one of the greatest resistance movements to imperialism in Africa. I started with the intention of writing about him in the first book entitled “Kimaathi, Mau Mau’s First Prime Minister of Kenya”. I wanted particularly to emphasize that he was the first Prime Minister - that is a fact which has been forgotten today. But as I wrote the pamphlet with limited resources and time, I found that I was not doing justice to a great revolutionary leader. So I changed the title in the follow-up book. It remains for future historians to collect all the information on Kimathi and present a well-researched and documented book on him - that is the least that the Kenyan nation can do to the memory of one of its greatest leaders.

**Similarly, you have reserved a special dedication to Pio Gama Pinto ... why? And now the new book you have edited? What gives you the most satisfaction about it?**

The book on Pinto remains a lifelong passion with me. Pinto is another victim of the same forces that killed Kimaathi and other Mau Mau leaders and the movement itself. Lack of time in writing it while I was working full-time and other activities kept me from completing the book. In a way it was a good thing, as I managed to get additional material on him and also linked up with his family who also remain outsiders in the official Kenyan history. So the fact that the book, to be launched on October 16, 2018 at the Kenya National Theatre, has come out at all is very satisfying - and that it has been published and launched in Kenya is of particular significance. I started working on it only after I retired. But we got there in the end. I hope it leads to restoring Pinto to his rightful place in Kenya’s history with a monument and a research institute to work on his and Kimaathi’s and Mau Mau’s history.

**And Makhan Singh?**

There is a special place for Makhan Singh in the history of Kenya. He has been totally ignored and removed from history books. Yet he was the fundamental force that created the politics of working class that drove the forces of liberation in Kenya. With Makhan Singh, there needs to be a restoration of the role of working class as a whole. Yet there is no lack of information on Makhan Singh as there is on Pinto and Kimathi. His two books on the history of Kenya as well as the Makhan Singh Archives and Zarina Patel’s book (“Unquiet”) provide a wealth of information on him - if only the nation was ready to open its eyes and ears to this great champion of working class and a working-class consciousness that seems to have faded from the nation’s consciousness. It was also satisfying for me that I have made contact with Makhan Singh’s sons and daughter and their children. My contact with the family started when I organised an event on Makhan Singh at the London Metropolitan University where I lectured.

**How would you describe your political leanings? Extreme Left, Just Left, or where? Or do you simply fight injustice where you find it, especially in Kenya?**

Labels are unhelpful and often dangerous, especially in Kenya where capitalism remains as the elephant in the room and the very name socialism remains banned, if not legally, at least by political pressure. I have no hesitation in saying I am for socialism and against capitalism and imperialism. Taking a stand against exploitation and oppression has been made “dirty terms” in Kenya and people are afraid to proclaim their socialist vision for fear of falling out of favour of the establishment. In this situation, the greatest loss suffered by people, their land and their lives cannot be challenged in practice. I cannot fight injustice on my own; it is even more difficult to do so while I am not in Kenya. Yet my leanings are towards a people’s movement for socialism and I believe the aims of Mwakenya-December Twelve Movement, as articulated in their publications in the 1980, remains a viable program to revolve the contradictions that people face today. But I am optimistic as I see a new generation active on the ground and on social media ready to challenge the *status quo*.

**You are a consummate librarian and over the past 30 years or so you have been on a crusade about the changes needed in the African environment of libraries and the dissemination of information, what is the state of affairs in Kenya today? What needs to be done to improve it?**

I mentioned in one of my books that the opportunity to change the direction of librarianship at the time of independence from the colonial perspective to one that satisfies people’s information needs was lost. The power of colonialism was too strong for librarians to challenge the status quo. After independence, the influence of Britain, USA and other Western powers to reinforce capitalist relations and ensuring imperialist exploitation of Kenyan resources ensured that our minds were captured and turned away from Kenyan needs and achievements. Western librarianship, as propagated by the British Council, the Library of Congress and related institutions is seen as the only one possible. I touch upon people’s librarianship practices in terms of oral traditions as well as that developed by Mau Mau as the basis of developing an independent system orientated to working people, not to elite. Some of us have set up the Progressive African Library and Information Activists’ Group (PALIAct) which has established the Ukombozi Library in Nairobi as an example of what is needed and what can be done. Yet, the entire public library service as well as academic libraries remain aloof of meeting the real information needs of people of Kenya. One clear example of its failure is that it has not collected stored and disseminated information about Mau Mau, about Kimathi and other leaders in the War of Independence.

So what can be done? As a start, we need to liberate our minds from the blinkers imposed by imperialism and its information systems. Open our minds to alternative ideas and experiences. Remain open to the possibility that socialism is an alternative system to capitalism for without political change, information itself remains in prison. At one level, it is a struggle for every individual librarian, archivist, journalist and every information worker. But they also need to come together to jointly look for alternatives to their one-directional theories and practices. Link up with

others in Africa and around the world to see their views and visions. There is a large movement of progressive librarianship in USA, in Europe and other countries. Kenya can learn lessons from them but also teach them from our own examples so we all march together in solving our information problems in our own ways without relying of NGOs and foreign “experts” dedicated to perpetuating mental, moral and economic enslavement on us.