



## The King of Kahel

*Tierno Monénembo , Nicholas Elliott (Translator)*

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Tierno Monenembo's *The King of Kahel* was originally published in France in 2008 and was the winner of the French literary prize, the *prix Renaudot*, which is awarded to the author of an outstanding original novel. Loosely based on the life of Olivier de Sanderval, a man who journeyed to Guinea to build an empire by conquering the hostile region of Fouta Djallon, the book exposes how Sanderval braves all dangers to build a railway that will bring modern civilization to Africa.

## The King of Kahel Details

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Author : Tierno Monénembo , Nicholas Elliott (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The King of Kahel for online ebook

### Harry Rutherford says

The King of Kahel is my book from Guinea for the Read The World challenge. It is the first book printed by AmazonCrossing, Amazon's own publishing imprint specialising in translated literature. They say 'AmazonCrossing uses customer feedback and other data from Amazon sites to identify exceptional works that deserve a wider, global audience.' So this book was presumably picked up because it was a big hit in French.

It's rather unusual among all the post-colonial literature I've read for the Read The World challenge, because the hero is a European colonialist. Specifically, it's about Olivier de Sanderval, a real person, a man from a wealthy family of provincial French industrialists who did some exploring in what is now Guinea and wanted to set himself up as an African king.

And he's not just the hero in the narrow sense of being the central character; it is very much his story and he is presented as a sympathetic character.

It's always interesting to have your expectations confounded, if only because it reveals what those expectations are. Because there's nothing terribly radical about this novel. If it had been written by a white French novelist I wouldn't have thought anything of it; Monénembo has lived in France for nearly 40 years; and yet I was in fact surprised.

That aside, this is an enjoyable if unexceptional literary novel. It is light and cheery in tone; the back cover claims that 'Monénembo has created nothing short of a jovial Heart of Darkness', which is about as baffling a description as I've ever encountered. The book reads to me like a playful re-imagining of history, so I assumed it was only based lightly on the historical Sanderval. Apparently, though, Monénembo did a lot of research and had access to the Sanderval family archives, so there may be more history in it than I realised... perhaps if I'd realised that I would have enjoyed it more. Or maybe I'd rather have read a straight biography.

As an example the book being unexpectedly accurate, Google found me this: a real coin produced by the real Olivier de Sanderval to serve as currency for his kingdom of Kahel. The Arabic script reads 'Sanderval'. Which is sort of amazing, actually.

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### Tony says

I'm always on the lookout for new fiction from Africa, so when I saw this translation of a Guinean book was available I snapped it up. Aside from my interest in world literature, my grandparents lived in Conakry from 1960-62, so the country holds a particular interest for me. The novel as a form does not have a long history in Africa, and as a result, much of the African fiction available in the West focuses on the struggle for independence and the legacy of colonialism. This book goes further back in history to deliver a fictionalized version of the exploits of 19th-century French adventurer Olivier de Sanderval, whose personal ambitions were at least partly to blame for France's colonization of what is modern-day Guinea.

Sanderval was a prodigiously talented and wealthy man of his time, whose childhood romance with tales of exploration were the catalyst for his adult ambitions to carve a slice out of the African pie for himself (and to a lesser extent, France). He was also a prolific writer who extensively documented his travels, and the author

of this novel also had access to private family archives in gathering material for the book. Unfortunately this seems like a case where having too much "true" information at one's hands actually inhibits the fiction. Far too much of the book reads like a thinly fictionalized rendering of a travelogue, in which various trials and tribulations are chronicled in a manner which becomes slightly tedious.

The book does a decent job of illustrating the complexities of Europe's colonization of sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than simply decrying European colonialism, the story illustrates the internal strife among various local potentates, as well as the policy disagreements within the French establishment. In Sanderval's attempts to lock in trading rights, right of way for a railroad, and a land-grant for his own personal fiefdom, he encounters all manner of cunning and shifty characters, both French and Fula. However, it never really manages to engage as storytelling. So, even though the author handles the colonial material with a more judicious touch than most, I kept wishing I was reading a good biographical profile of Sanderval instead. Worth a look if you've an interest in African fiction or European colonialism, but probably not a book that will interest the general reader.

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### **Alexia Houde says**

Read for my Postcolonialism class.

2.5, I didn't hate this book, I just don't think it was for me.

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### **K's Bognoter says**

Historisk roman om den nu glemte, franske 1800-tals eventyrer Aimé Olivier de Sanderval, som satte sig for at blive konge af Fouta Djallon i det nuværende Guinea i Vestafrika – og for en kort bemærkning virkelig lykkedes med sit forehavende, ihvertfald delvist. En fascinerende fortælling, som den guineanske forfatter Tierno Monémbo imidlertid desværre kun delvist formår at omsætte til en lige så fascinerende roman.

Læs hele boganmeldelsen på K's bognoter: <http://bognoter.dk/2018/07/05/tierno-...>

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### **Tucker says**

Sweeping story about the life of a Frenchman whose dream from childhood was to become the king of Fouta Djallon. He develops a great affinity for Africa while never shedding the imperialist culture he comes from. Vivid depiction of the intersection of cultures leading to war. The narrative style is original and entertaining.

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### **Bob Newman says**

Fearless Frenchman Finds Forest Fief

We have a number of colonial tales of white men who strove to carve out kingdoms among peoples in odd corners of the world that had not yet been much influenced by the West. Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" does come to mind, but more impressive is the true story of the white rajahs of Sarawak, a British

family dynasty that ruled a large patch on Borneo's north coast for over a century. When these tales are told, it is always from the European point of view. The whites act, the `natives' are acted upon. THE KING OF KAHHEL provides an interesting glimpse from the other side. Monénembo, a Guinean long in exile in France, tells a story of the scion of an important Lyon family made rich by capitalist exploits in France, who is lured to Africa by romantic dreams and tries persistently to carve out a kingdom in the then-remote Fouta Djallon region, now part of Guinea. He longs to `civilize' the place, a theme touched upon in ironic fashion by the author, who valiantly endeavors to write as a colonial-minded Frenchman would think. Far from being some kind of Indiana Jones, Aimé Olivier de Sanderval barely squeaks through. The Africans continually outwit him, punish him, betray him, and try to bump him off for good. Only by becoming more African is he able to survive. He can't trust the emissaries of France (who refuse to recognize that he has any rights in Fouta Djallon) and he is caught in the endless intrigues of the Fula almami and ruling circles also. The reluctance of Fula rulers to get involved with whites is paralleled by the disinterest and reluctance of French officialdom to back de Sanderval's schemes. In the end, as we know from history, no Frenchman was able to become a king on his own in Africa. France finally pushed `the king of Kahel' aside and took over. As to the fate of the `would be king', you'll have to read the book.

At first, the unusual style of dialogue put me off. I ascribed it to bad translation. But as I read, I got used to it, and felt that probably the translator had preserved what was unique in this most interesting book. Based on a true story---most of the characters really existed---the dialogues and details have been created by the author who describes the land in a most colorful and appealing way. I wondered if there were really eucalyptus forests in Guinea in the 19th century and stumbled over a few other such questions, but overall I enjoyed this novel and would recommend it highly to anyone interested in adventure, in colonial era Africa, or historical fiction.

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### **Willa Johnson says**

Couldn't get into it.

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### **Claire Vo says**

Would have liked this book much more if the narrator didn't sloppily make himself so apparent every few 100 pages or so. Despite the occasionally poor writing, enjoyed the story.

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### **Mohamed says**

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### **Maya Panika says**

A fictionalised account of the real-life Oliver de Sanderval's brief sojourn as king of his own African

kingdom.

The story is an interesting one, but the style constantly gets in the way of its telling. I found it overblown and over written, the humour laboured, the jokes telegraphed and there are more exclamation marks than a teenage girl's diary.

A good story badly told.

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### Faridali says

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### Veterini says

Une biographie romancée d'un aventurier qui rêvait de se tailler un royaume en Afrique ! Il y a des qualités, surtout dans la description du peuple Peul, un peuple assez étrange ne rechignant pas à couper des têtes et en même temps amateur de paperasserie. Mais le gros problème est que la moitié des points sont des points d'exclamations ! Si ! Pourquoi ? Je sais pas ! Mais c'est fatigant ! Non ?

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### Kate says

I received *Le Mot Juste: A Dictionary of Classical and Foreign Words and Phrases* for my tenth birthday, and though I am unable to locate it in the stacks at the moment, (though I suspect that it is somewhere in the second or third row of books on the shelf in the foyer) i distinctly remember an entry for a word in Javanese (or Zulu?) that translates roughly into English as "the act of stealing everything a man owns by borrowing each of his possessions one by one and not returning them". This word, if I were willing, in this sweltering heat, to move away from my spot in front of the fan to get up and look for the aforementioned book, would make a fitting description in this review for precisely what happened to the kingdom of Fouta Djallon and her princes and *almami*-spiritual ledger and ruler of the entire kingdom- but also what ultimately happens to Aime Olivier Viscount de Sanderval in his doomed pursuit of the Kingdom of Kahel.

The real de Sanderval was:" the spitting image of the 19th century. . .Beginning with his education and temperament, everything had prepared him to live for the passions of his time - ideas, science, and the great expeditions. He had been molded with the mind of a pioneer in the century of pioneers." His expeditions into the interior of africa produced the maps necessary for the french to begin staking their claim there. Tierno Monenembo has written a romance of this brave and idiosyncratic man, whose religious, scientific and cultural theories made him both an object of interest and scorn in French society. In *The King of Kahel*, Aime dreams of a kingdom of his own in Africa, and in his 42 year, heads to Africa to conquer one. The year is 1880, and he is headed to western Africa to build a railroad. De sandervals approach to colonization is one of friendship, and while the French government ignores his exploits, he is steadily building up the political loyalties and friendships that he needs to install himself as king of the provence of Kahel and get the treaties

that he needs to build a railroad from the coast to the jungle. He sweet talks the Fula ledge dears, making them his friends and partners in crime. His dream of Afircan riches get closer and closer, as he manipulates the warring princes Into giving him land and title.

Once he finds success, the french government begins to show Interest in his conquests, and just as Sanderval has carved out a little kingdom - a trading post here, a railway concession there, so the French begin to take sandervals land- here a military garrison, there a colonial governors mansion. eventually, his dreams.

TKOK is a starts off as a wonderful romantic adventure and was an enjoyable read, though not a replacement or a peer of Things Fall Apart.

An aside, TKOK was the first complete novel that I read entirely in e-book form, and I must say, the experience is vastly different from reading a book printed on paper. The highlighting and search functions made the 'wait-who was that guy again?' question answerable in a seconds, and the recall of interesting quotes immediate. Something is lost, however, when a character is tracking hares through 'the rocky Mediterranean inlets' of Cassis, and with a quick highlight and a a featherlgiht touch of a screen, there are images of the rocky Mediterranean inlets near Cassis. They are beautiful, but that immediacy and unalterable fact of their appearance robs the reader of an opportunity to imagine what they might look like. I thought to turn it off, but once I started accessing the Wikipedia entries at my fingertips I couldn't stop. What is a kepi? Who was Samori Toure? The answers were right there. I barely needed to think. I got bored. I haven't given up on the dead trees yet.

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### **Sarah says**

Biographie romancée d'un aventurier ayant réellement existé, Olivier de Sanderval, qui fut maire en France puis roi en pays Peul.

Un personnage pittoresque comme l'atteste son parcours et auquel l'auteur, Tierno Monenembo donne une personnalité absolument excentrique, mais qui incarne également la vision des colonisateurs français "progressistes" du XIXe siècle comme Jules Ferry.

Ses aventures au Fouta Djallon nous donnent un aperçu du fonctionnement de la société peule à cette époque, tandis que ses démêlées avec l'administration française dressent un tableau assez juste du fonctionnement de la Troisième République.

Petit bémol : si l'histoire est prenante, le style ne m'a pas séduite plus que ça.

Bref, contente d'avoir élargi mes horizons en lecture francophone au delà de la France. J'ajouterai sans doute *Peuls* du même auteur à ma liste de livres à lire.

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### **Karen says**

Aime Sanderval (Olivier de Sanderval) dreamed of going to Africa to find land that had never been seen by a white man before, so that he could set about improving the Negroes, and creating a new Versailles for France. He was determined to be a King. He believed that he could win over the Kingdom Fouta Djallon (Central Guinea) by enlightenment, not by fighting, and he was convinced if he could become one of the Fulas, they would make him a King.

Monenembo has written this wonderful historical fiction, based on the Sanderval's trips to Fouta Djallon. It is rather satirical in nature, and I found the attitudes to be humorous.

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