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2. CASELY HAYFORD: THE FICTIVE DIMENSION OF AFRICAN PERSONALITY

by

Nnabuenyi Ugonna

*I am black all over and proud of
my beautiful black skin -1*

J.E. Bruce to M. Agbedi

The term African personality is believed to have first been used by Edward Blyden in his appraisal of Majola Agbebi's role in the founding of what was regarded as the first "native African church" in Nigeria. He saw the inaugural sermon to the African Church in Lagos on 21 December, 1902, by Agbebi as evidence that "Africa is struggling for a separate personality"². In 1907 John Edward Bruce and a group of blacks in New York wanted 11 October observed each year by black Americans as Majola Agbebi day to "immortalize in him an African personality"³.

Beginning from these early references to the concept, African personality has come to be used by political theorists and social and literary critics to describe the philosophy of Africanness. It can, in fact, be said that the idea of African personality is central to African thought. It has been expressed in such other terms as negritude, ethiopianism, blackism and authenticity.

Edward W. Blyden, W.E. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and other pioneer panafricanists have analysed extensively several aspects of the concept of African personality in their theories of African political thought. Other scholars and critics of the history of ideas have commented on the growth and development of the notion of African personality. But, as far as is known, only Casely Hayford among the early African nationalist thinkers has fictionalized the idea. This essay attempts to examine Casely Hayford's treatment of the theme of African personality in his novel *Ethiopia Unbound* first published in 1911.

In *Ethiopia Unbound* Casely Hayford has attempted to assert African personality artistically. It must however be pointed out that as a work of art the book has puzzled critics. In bibliographies of books on African literature it is hardly included. Contemporary critics saw it variously as "a product of the times, when races are feeling after harmony and co-operation", as a book dealing with "the question of retaining all that is good in native institutions" or as a "profound analytical study of present racial and sociological conditions as seen through the eyes of an African scholar and thinker".⁴ Among the few reviews that comment on the fictive structure of the work is the one that says:

*Mr. Hayford...has now cast his ideas on the subject of racial problems more or less into the form of fiction. We say 'more or less', because some of the chapters...break quite away from the slender thread of story on which most of the episodes are strung.*⁵

The work gives this impression. It is undoubtedly episodic but an underlying fictive unity binds all the episodes together. The culture-conscious personality of the hero, Kwamankra, unites the work thematically.

It would appear that as a writer the main purpose of Hayford (1866-1930) was to achieve, through his writing, the eradication of all inequalities arising from racial difference to salvage his people from what he called "national and racial death" and to assert the dignity of the African. He was an educationist, journalist, lawyer and statesman, who wrote fiction in order, primarily, to convey his ideas to a larger audience. He was not a writer first, and then a nationalist afterwards. Essentially he was a nationalist whose main purpose in writing was to illustrate his ideology.⁶

In his numerous writings he has emphasized the same basic ideas. Whether addressing the League of Nations Union in London,⁷ or sending a message to "the scholars of the New High Class School, Lagos"⁸ or writing an editorial opinion in his paper, *The Gold Coast Leader*, his themes would invariably be human freedom, irrespective of race, creed, or class; universal human dignity; equality under the law. But colonial society by its very nature was a negation of freedom and equality. It enthroned race pride and human exploitation. Hayford therefore fought hard to make it possible for his people to regain their pre-colonial freedom, equality and self-respect.

To this effect he preached his nationalistic doctrines, namely, that the union of West Africa, as a prelude to "Africa

nationhood" was imperative, that "before ever the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people", and so had "native institutions": the state, the king, the People, the Judicial, the Commercial, the Religious and the Municipal systems,⁹ and that it was about time that "the Authorities at Downing Street" left the people "to develop upon the national lines of their own institutions".¹⁰ These ideas are imaginatively rendered in *Ethiopia Unbound*. Consequently the book contains the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling, and yet, as Irving Howe has remarked in another context, absorbs into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology.¹¹

Ethiopia Unbound is a remarkable story of ideas about race relations, a story whose main theme is the problem of universal human relationship. The relationship operates on two distinct but related levels: on the one hand it is the problem of human relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and on the other between white and black. The two trends imperceptibly fade into each other in so far as the colonizer is white and the colonized black. This is why invariably any attack on colonialism tends to be expressed in racial terms.

Ethiopia Unbound tells the life story of Kwamankra—his experiences, first, as a student in London, and then, as a legal practitioner in Ghana; his observations of social life both in London and in various Ghanaian towns—Kumasi, Cape Coast, Sekondi and Accra; his commentary on social institutions, on education, religion, economics; and his impartial criticism of the whole concept of colonial government as applied to the West African society—the corruption, callousness and exclusiveness of colonial missionaries and political officers, the neglect and dilapidation suffered by public utilities as railways, water supplies and electricity and the general absence of sound development schemes. To this extent, the work appears to be a social documentary. But then the book has another dimension which elevates it to the status of a classic: an epic quality, characterized by heroism and a sense of deep personal tragedy and stoical triumph.

The work is certainly an exercise in African cultural projection which is a subtle and positive way of protest. The ingenious device is to present characters, that is, African characters, in such light as to belie any suggestion of their inherent inferiority. Similarly, several aspects of indigenous African culture are rationalised. Their noble, useful, serene, elegant or remarkable qualities are highlighted while their grosser traits are either ignored or glossed over. Every creative artist, of course, follows this procedure. From chunks of life—battles, hatred, fear, birth, death, quarrels, eating,

drinking, marriage, endearment,¹² he selects those combination that will answer to his own vision of life. In effect, as Per Lubbock puts it, he remakes these chunks:

in conditions that are never known in life, conditions in which a thing is free to grow according to its own law, expressing itself unhindered; he liberates and completes...¹³

Casely Hayford, in *Ethiopia Unbound*, has attempted to show that African culture is not synonymous with barbarism and cruelty, backwardness and crudity. As Mary Kingsley in a letter to the editor of the Liberian paper, *New Africa*, asked African nationalists who are conversant with their own indigenous culture to do, Hayford has indeed demonstrated that "African nationalism is a good thing, and that it is not a welter of barbarism, cannibalism and cruelty...that there is an African law and an African culture; that the African has institutions and a state form of his own".¹⁴

This appeal has, as a matter of fact, been answered by other educated African nationalists in the form of treatises and newspaper articles but *Ethiopia Unbound* is clearly the first attempt to represent this idea in fiction. Before Mary Kingsley's statement in 1901, Edward Blyden in 18-8 focussed critical attention on the cultural contribution which Africa has made to the growth of world culture in his *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*.

Throughout his public career, Casely Hayford endeavoured to preserve what is good and admirable in his culture. All his written works tend to be lucid expositions of different aspects of the African culture involving institutions, land tenure, communal life, justice, the arts, and so on. He knew it was important for Africans to come forward to project their culture themselves. His whole objective as a cultural publicist is best summarised by the following statement contained in his address to the National Congress of British West Africa meeting in December, 1929:

In these days when there is a tendency among the races of man to come together in their natural groups, it will be insincere for us to pretend that African nationhood does not interest us... Indeed while propagandists of another race are spreading abroad doctrines which may submerge our continent and make the black man perpetually a hewer of wood and drawer of water, it will be criminal in us to remain silent, and to pretend that those matters do not concern us.¹⁵

The problem was how best to demonstrate to the world that Africa has culture. Should revolutionary or violent methods be used? Casely Hayford rejected violence. Perhaps his legal education made him prefer constitutional and peaceful means. Yet he believed in action. "African manhood", he asserts, "demands that the Ethiopian should seek not his opportunity, or ask for elbow room from the white man, but that he should create the one or the other for himself".¹⁶ But he maintained that "the African's way to proper recognition lies not at present so much in the exhibition of material force and power, as in the gentler art of persuasion by the logic of facts and of achievements before which all reasonable men must bow".¹⁷ By using the words, "at present", Hayford shows that he was not after all totally against violence but that he was only being realistic and practical. Resorting to violence without adequate preparation, he surmised, would be disastrous. So his pacifism was only pragmatic. His policy was dictated by his own maxim, "Take what you get and get what you want". Rather than gain no immediate political ends, he would prefer to compromise on certain vital issues.¹⁸ This aspect of his character was responsible for the bitter criticism he received toward the end of his life, but he preferred a little measure of success to downright failure.

"The gentler art of persuasion" - this is the key to the general tone of *Ethiopia Unbound*, and it summarises the effect the work is designed to achieve, that is, to persuade all readers and especially whites and deracine Africans, that African culture developed independent of western culture. Hayford was aware that people are not persuaded by mere verbal protestations and unsubstantiated claims. He therefore stresses the need for resorting to "the logic of facts and of achievements". Consequently he makes his chief characters discuss different aspects of African cultural achievement with the aim of highlighting their important merits. The importance of African culture is dramatized by paralleling African cultural institutions with the corresponding western forms and then showing the advantages of the African patterns over the western.

This process begins in *Ethiopia Unbound* with the introduction in the first chapter, of two of the main characters in the book, Kwamankra and Whitely. Their personalities pervade the work but they hardly impress us as flesh and blood. They are more or less ideas personified and are used generally as mouth-pieces for expressing particular ideas. Kwamankra, in a sense, is like Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* and just as *Rasselas* is a philosophical tale so is *Ethiopia Unbound* an ideological story. Kwamankra is conceived as symbolic of African personality: logical, dignified, rational, considerate, a negation of the typical western concept of the African. He believes in God, but this is after due consideration of the facts, not out of

fear or superstition.

But his white foil, Whitely, a theology student doubts the divinity of Christ. Whitely is torn between disbelief and a sense of obligation, not to God, but to his mother. To him (and he symbolizes white priesthood) belief or non-belief is not sufficiently disturbing, for, despite his doubts, he takes Holy Orders and later becomes a colonial chaplain in West Africa where he degenerates into a time-serving religious minister.

The story of *Ethiopia Unbound* opens, after a brief introduction by the narrator, with the hero Kwamankra and Whitely walking along Tottenham Court Road in London discussing ethics, religion and metaphysics. The philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, as expounded in his *Meditations*, is paralleled with the "teaching of the Holy Nazarene". The divinity of Jesus Christ is discussed, and Kwamankra, after contending that the Anglo-Saxon word from which God is derived does not in any way suggest the idea of *good*, argues that the Christian attributes of God—omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, are of course "borrowed from the Romans, who were pagans like ourselves, and who, indeed had much to learn from the Ethiopians through the Greeks".¹⁹ Throughout the book preconceived ideas, familiar prejudices, and popular attitudes are subtly debunked by logical discussion and dialogue.

In Kwamankra's lodging the two friends continue to discuss religion. This is the opportunity for Kwamankra who is Fanti to dilate upon African religion. He analyses the African concept of God. He explains that the Fanti word for God, *Nyiakropon*, for example, is the "combination of distinct root ideas in one word". Analysed the word is *Nyia nuku ara oye pon* meaning He who alone is great. The drift of Kwamankra's argument is that European philosophical, ethical and religious ideas were largely derived from Ethiopia, and Ethiopia ambiguously means Africa or Asia or both. By his logic Jesus Christ, Marcus Aurelius, Buddha, Confucius, Cleanthes and other stoics were Ethiopians since the idea of stoicism originated from Ethiopia.

Hayford has good reason for stressing the significance of African religious and philosophical ideas. The emphasis stems not merely from the fact that African social life is fundamentally religious but also from the feeling increasingly held at the turn of the century that Africa would have a tremendous moral influence on the rest of the world just as the West has had an unprecedented scientific impact on Africa. This is not to say that Africans envisioned a moral influence only. They also dreamt of a time when they would be (some would add, once more, implying that there was a time when Africa was) at the helm of all progress, scientific or moral.

The general impression however was that Africa's influence on the world would be primarily a moral and spiritual one. Kwamankra addressing Whitely declares that the "nation that can in the next century, show the greatest output of spiritual strength, that is the nation that will lead the world, and as Buddha from Africa taught Asia, so may Africa again lead the way". Some observers have not hesitated to attribute what they regard as a noticeable change in European sensibility at the beginning of the century to the influence of Asian and African cultures. For illustration they draw attention to the new psychological theories in the novels of James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust; the intuitional approach to poetry and painting; to the philosophy of William James, B Bergson and Whitehead, and Cassirer; to what was the new music of Debussy and Stravinsky and Ravel.²⁰

Africa was therefore looked upon as a land of great promise not only by Africans but by many Europeans. It is certainly one of the continents with the greatest exploitable mineral wealth in the world and it has been repeatedly argued that Africans live beggarly lives amidst plenty. Perhaps the realization of the existence of this tremendous potential, more than mere wishful thinking, accounts for the numerous professions of future African greatness. In other words, African optimistic social philosophy stems, perhaps, more from the determination of the Africans to bridge the gap between them and the people of Europe than from a mere dream of an unspecified future greatness.

But yet there appears to be an element of wish-fulfillment in the pervasive optimism of most African writers. Initially this optimism grew out of a hope for better things to come (a Christian influence) in the face of the prevailing conditions of the black man in the slave and colonial world. At first the optimism was other-worldly and found expression in Negro Spirituals, in ritualism and clairvoyance. Negro leaders, largely to bolster up the courage of their followers, had promised them that God would place them above their oppressors. When slavery was abolished and colonialism receded, the stark reality of an independent political and economic life stared the people in the face, and so the attitude of eschatological escape gave way to sober pragmatism; the preacher yielded much ground to the technician and theological colleges declined in favour of farm and industrial institutes.

Still, African optimism remains, but it is no longer an optimism of self-resignation, of vague hope. Instead it is an activist optimism, based on scientific planning as well as on the dialectics of history. So that when Addison Gayle maintains that "the pendulum has swung backwards and forwards and those

who are safe today need not be so tomorrow; even William Faulkner was capable of envisioning that world in which the pendulum had swung back into ancient history; and the one third of mankind which is white may yet be petitioning black governments for its human rights;"²¹ he is expressing more than a mere optimistic view of Africa. Ngugi makes his hero, Njoroge, feel that "although all men are brothers, the black people had a special mission to the world because they were the chosen people of God."²² Blyden has come to the logical conclusion that both slavery and colonialism were providential means of preparing Africans for world leadership. He has based his conclusion on the following premise: Christ's dictum that he who would be chief must become the servant of all. The African has become the servant of all through slavery and colonialism and therefore...²³

Gayle, Ngugi and Blyden, in fact, do not merely affirm a condition they would wish to see in Africa; they also try to instill into Africans a revolutionary spirit. Casely Hayford does the same thing through *Ethiopia Unbound*. He has summarized Blyden's teaching as "Man know thy self".²⁴ These words aptly describe Hayford's own mission and philosophy. His attempt in *Ethiopia Unbound* is to bring home to the Africans the truth of his conviction that only by upholding her own distinctive culture could Africa win back her self-respect and dignity. Thus he makes his hero, Kwamankra, discuss at length not only African religion and philosophy but propound a theory of African education and advocate the African system of marriage.

Kwamankra's theory of education is based on the establishment of national universities throughout Africa. The universities would be fully national in outlook; African languages Fanti, Hausa, etc., would be taught; academic gowns would be replaced with national garbs. His observations on the needs of African universities are surprisingly very topical today. Many universities in Africa today attempt to adapt Western university traditions to African conditions.²⁵ E.W. Blyden has also urged for a distinct African education policy, but he has maintained that he would prefer emphasis to be laid on the classics and mathematics.²⁶ So that while Blyden would suggest the study of Greek and Latin, Hayford advocates the study of African languages. This is a spectacular advance in the concept of African education.

It must be said however that Hayford, like Blyden, admired classical education and in *Ethiopia Unbound* Kwamankra strives to show that the social life of the peoples of Africa was very much like that of the Greeks. In chapter nineteen, "A Similitude: The Greek and the Fanti", for example, Kwamankra makes his son, Ekra Kwow read passages from the *Odyssey* and

after each passage he points out the cultural affinity between Fanti and Greek societies. After the boy has read the passage relating to the visit of Athene to Nausicaa, for instance, Kwamankra exclaims: "That's good. Does that remind you of anything you see daily around you"? His son replies: "It looks very much like how the Fanti women prepare to do their washing in the brook, and it is curious the mention of the use of oil to anoint the body after a bath. Why, that's just what our people do".²⁷ Kwamankra points out other parallels: King Alcinous's court resembles the court of an Omanhin with his chiefs and the elders; the Greeks, like the Fanti, washed their hands before taking their meals; the Fanti Nyame corresponds with the Greek Zeus and the Fanti oracles and popular superstitions such as associating the idea of sneezing with an impending blessing, are similar to those of the Greek.

The purpose of this exercise in comparative cultural evaluation is clear. Societies and cultures, like individuals, struggle for excellence. Individuals in the society strive for status symbols just as cultures seek for recognition. Kwamankra's "similitude" therefore is intended to gain a status symbol for his culture as his concluding statement in the chapter aptly illustrates:

*And when you recall the familiar way in which the poet [Homer] speaks of Eurybates, the herald of Ulysses, 'Older than he, dark-skinned, round in the shoulders, with curly hair', it dawns upon the Ethiopian that he gains vastly more in self-respect by intimate acquaintance with the ancient Greek than with the modern Saxon.*²⁸

As regards marriage, Hayford's attitude is straightforward enough. The African system of marriage, called polygyny or the practice of marrying more than a wife at a time was better for the African than the western tradition of monogamy. His basic argument is moral. He argues that the average so-called convert before he came into the church lived a decent, open life in his marital relations, but "embracing Christianity invariably meant for him adopting subterfuges and chicanery to cover up the way of the old life, which not all the spiritual graces could help him to brush aside."²⁹

The human misery resulting from the failure of the association between Tador-Kuma and Ekuba narrated in chapter two is an indictment against monogamy. Under a polygynous system Ekuba would not perhaps have suffered as she did. She would not have been left to fend for herself in a strange and hostile environment. She would have become one of Tador-Kuma's wives and would thus have got the protection she so much needed.

The story of Tom Palmer, an ambitious youth, always dressed in "silk hat and patent leather boots" is illustrative of the cultural revolution *Ethiopia Unbound* is meant to bring about and therefore Hayford's concept of the ideal African personality. Tom Palmer is an African caught in an alien culture. At first he struts around as "leader of society" but later discovers, through the help of Kwamankra, the African sage, that love does not come only "when she is wooed in Parisian skirts and Regent Street high heels". Palmer ends up by marrying more than one wife and replacing his silk hat, etc., with sober African attire. Hayford's message here is unmistakable: return to African culture; develop it if necessary with what is edifying in the western culture. Africans should eschew a slavish imitation of the whites and should at all times maintain their cultural integrity. In this way a worthwhile, meaningful African personality would be created.

The idea of utilising good aspects of other cultures to sustain African culture has sometimes been referred to as "selective acculturation" and some commentators have contended it entails a distortion of African culture *per se*. They argue that the mingling of African and European cultures amounts to a cultural miscegenation, what Jahnheinz Jahn has designated the "Skokian" view of culture. Such problems arise because of a misconception of the metaphysical implication of the idea of growth, and by growth one does not mean additive accumulation, but intrinsic, structural development. Growth implies the idea of both change and of continuity. In the process of cultural change and development individual items of culture may be replaced by others, a mud bed may be replaced by a steel one and the tractor may replace the hoe, yet, the essence, the totality of the culture in the African environment would still be Africa. There persists the cultural continuity, the element of historicity which links present-day Africa with the past. In selective acculturation therefore African culture remains the main stream into which flows the western cultural tributary.

In *Ethiopia Unbound* Hayford has attempted to assert and define African personality. Through the character of Kwamankra he answers the question as to whether or not contemporary Africa has "collective achievement...like other nationalities".³⁰ Kwamankra shows that Africa has a religion, a philosophy of life, music, art, law, etc.; that African culture though different from western culture is not inferior to it. He has also established that the African is a cultured man and is not inferior to the white man and that the only differences, psychological or mental, between a black man and a white man are "those which can be attributed solely to education and to cultural background".³¹ It is, in fact, the social heritage, the cultural tradition, the prevailing *zeitgeist*, which differentiates

the black man from the white man and not any mystical gene or hormone or any transcendental power possessed by the one and lacked by the other. As Frank Chapman Jr. has aptly remarked, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness".³²

The need for the assertion of African personality arose as a result of either the denial of the existence of African culture or the misrepresentation of the African and his way of life. *Ethiopia Unbound* has thematically demonstrated both the deep-rooted existence of different aspects of the African culture and the cultural, intellectual and spiritual capabilities of the black man. Casely Hayford in this work has therefore made a tremendous contribution to the growth of the idea of Africanness. The importance of *Ethiopia Unbound* lies, indeed, in its being the earliest known work to give an aesthetic dimension to this otherwise philosophical concept of African personality.

Footnotes

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3. *Loc. cit.*
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26. Blyden, Edward W. *Christianity, Islam...*, p. 97.
27. *Ethiopia Unbound*, p. 201.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
30. See Murphy, Edgar Gardner, *The Basis of Ascendancy*, New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, p. 42.
31. See Ugonna, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
32. Chapman, Frank Jr., 'Science and Africa' an unpublished manuscript reviewed in *Freedomways*, A Quarterly Review of the Negro Freedom Movement, 1966, p. 242.

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