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African Literatures in English

East and West

Gareth Griffiths



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earlier missionary tales of 'release', as witnessed by its sub-headings: Childhood, The Ashanti War 1869–70, The Report of the War to the King, How I Was nearly Killed, Three Months With Pagan Priests, I See My Father, Flight, The Return to the Ewe Country, At Home, The Death of My Wife and How I Revenged Her Death, I See My Mother and Relations Again, I Become a Christian, My Work as Evangelist, How I Teach. The 'exemplary life' genre also shares with the earlier 'release narratives' a view of pre-mission and pre-colonial African life which stresses their disruptive and barbaric nature. Once again, the story usually culminates in a conversion, and the basic evangelical Christian structure of sin and redemption, derived from the earlier narrative forms, is taken over by this later form. These similarities are less surprising when we notice that although these texts are not now overtly acknowledged as transcription (*Told By Himself* is ambiguous), the frontispiece acknowledges that it is again translated and abridged from the German version of Rev. P. Wiegräbe. This is evidence of the same multiple transcription and editing process described in the analysis of the earlier forms. The ambiguous claim to an authentic African authorship disguises this ongoing control.

In these texts, too, slavery is seen primarily as the product of inherent weaknesses within African traditional societies. Africans, it is implied, are responsible for their own enslavement, either directly, when they are sold as captives after inter-tribal wars, or indirectly, when they are separated from their families as a result of the disruptions caused by warfare. Both of these events were the causes of some enslavements, but the almost ritual way in which they are invoked, with no emphasis on the larger causes, nor of the ways in which domestic forms of slavery were replaced by active, commercial forms of chattel slavery, as European or Arab interventions into the local scenes of West and East Africa strengthened, suggests that the mission patrons had a strong interest in emphasising the negative aspects of pre-colonial African culture. By so doing, of course, they could present a conversion to Christianity as an escape from darkness into light, and from an evil past into a healthy future. This simplified version of the past remains a dominant feature of missionary 'historical' accounts such as *The Life of Aaron Kuku of Eweland*, where they are presented as part of an objective account of the African past. In fact we might conclude that the narrative spine and principal thematic features of the 'release narrative' form have, by this later period, become the standardised way of framing any African story published by missions.

It is clear from an examination of these mission-sponsored texts that there is a profound difficulty involved in classifying any of these forms as genuine 'African writing', even though they claim, in many cases, to be 'authored' by Africans. The palimpsestic nature of their transmission, and the discursive and institutional practices which they encode, both militate against an assertion that they are, in any simple sense, African texts. Yet they represented a significant part of the available vehicles of written representation in English for Africans through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They also played an important role in shaping European attitudes towards Africa and African life, since the various tract series in which they appeared were widely distrib-

uted and eagerly read. Finally, they had a great effect on African peoples' self-apprehension, as they helped form attitudes towards the past and towards traditional practices within the newly Christianised African communities themselves.

The African text produced under missionary patronage was one of the principal means of expression available to Africans of all political persuasions for a considerable period of time. As a result, in time even these highly controlled missionary genres could be appropriated by African writers with completely different agendas. Wherever Africans mastered writing, they could subvert their patrons' control and wrest the controlling structures to their own purposes. Many examples of this process of 'resistance' exist within the missionary-controlled texts which have survived. Two examples will have to suffice here: J. J. Walters's *Guanya Pau* (1891), now increasingly recognised as the earliest 'novel' written by an African, and the double text *My People of Kikuyu* and *The Life of Chief Wangombe*, by Jomo Kenyatta (1942). Despite their wide separation in time, both are texts which were written under the impulse of 'modernisation'. Both also incorporate elements of the basic narrative spines of the 'release narrative', the 'exemplary life' and the 'ethnographic' descriptive text. The earlier text was published by a commercial press (Lauer and Mattill, of Cleveland, Ohio). It was written while Walters was a student at Oberlin College, where he had been sent by missionaries from St John's Episcopal Mission at Robertsport, Liberia. The mission opened in 1878 and Walters was one of the earliest students. The later text, Kenyatta's *My People of Kikuyu* and *The Life of Chief Wangombe*, was printed in the Africa's Own Library series, numbered No. 1, and issued by the United Society for Christian Literature at the Lutterworth Press in 1942. A second edition appeared in 1945 and the text was re-issued again in 1966 by Oxford University Press, Nairobi, by which time its author had become the first President of independent Kenya.

Let me try to identify the ways in which mission patronage influenced these significant texts from two very different periods and regions, and the ways in which they resisted or dismantled this patronage by foregrounding the tensions between the mission publishing project and the local experience it sought to represent.

Joseph Jeffrey Walters's *Guanya Pau: The Story of an African Princess* runs to 146 pages in the 1891 edition.¹² It has a claim to being the first long fiction by an African, predating J. E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) by twenty years. Like this later text, *Guanya Pau* is highly polemic, centring on a defence of reform for the position of women in African societies. The title page notes that Walters is a 'Native of Liberia, West Africa'. By 'native' it is implied that, as a Vai, he belongs to the 'aboriginal' Liberian tribes rather than to the community of freed slaves resettled there from America. *Guanya Pau* is arguably more formally constructed as a fiction than Casely Hayford's text, which is a blend of polemic essay and fictionalised autobiography. Walters's text draws heavily on forms such as the picaresque, with a loosely related series of episodes, each encapsulating a single, illustrative encounter. It is also clearly intertextual with the evangelical form of the *pèlerinage* tradition, pre-eminently represented by Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan, as

has been often noted, had a powerful effect as a role model on much English and indigenous language writing in Africa.

For these reasons *Guanya Pau* is a very important text in the history of English writing in Africa. Its scale and complexity mean that a full analysis of its many features cannot be offered here. I want only to note that it incorporates many of the features of the 'release narrative' structure I have already described, whilst simultaneously differing from it in a number of significant ways.

The story concerns a young Vai princess who is required to marry polygamously. She wishes to marry a young man who shares her abhorrence of polygamy, and who has gone to Freetown to earn the money to marry her. In the face of her mother's refusal to entertain her pleas against the arranged marriage, she flees her home with a female companion. At first, she intends only to avoid the marriage, but as the journey continues, and after a number of encounters which confirm her in her view of the subjugated and inhumane position of women in her society, she forms the intention to go to Freetown. There she knows that the missionaries will support her in her desire to avoid the evils of polygamy, and she will be free to marry her lover, Momo. In putting forward her case she develops a strong and surprisingly modern view of women's position:

The truth is, men are ever exercising their prerogatives to the letter, and we accept it without a question: but as soon as we assert ours, they brand us with transcending our sphere. So long has woman been deceived that her condition seems to be organic. I may not even now succeed, but Jassah, *the day will come*, THE DAY WILL COME. (123-4)

The main drive of the polemic is clearly in line with the long-standing missionary policy against polygamy, and this is the text's dominant message, as the introduction stresses: 'In short our women must be educated. The infamous system of betrothing girls when three or four years old must be obliterated. *Polygamy must be wiped out of the land*' (6). But the text does not equate this drive to modernise with an attack on all customs, nor with a negative portrayal of African societies in all their aspects as many later 'release narratives' do. In fact Walters is careful to distinguish between the men's (Poro) and women's (Sande) secret associations, discriminating between them in terms of their social effect, as he perceives it, and constructing a history and a genealogy for them which further this discrimination. In the only detailed analysis of the text so far published, J. V. Singler sums this up succinctly: 'From *Guanya Pau* alone, there is ample evidence that Walters was very much his own person, appalled by the abuse of women in Vai society yet fiercely proud of his Vai heritage, thoroughly Christian (and Christianised) yet able to laugh at the missionaries' imperfect adaptation to Africa'.¹³

Walters presents the origin of the Poro, the 'Boy's Gregree Bush' (or secret society), in positive terms as 'founded by a highly respected Vai elder who sought to forge a unity that would enable the Vai to protect themselves from belligerent peoples from the interior'.¹⁴ The Sande, Girl's Bush (or secret society), however, is characterised in the text as founded by 'the old wizard

Pandama-Pluzhaway, the Devil's brother-in-law' (26). Singler comments on this discrimination as follows: 'of the men's and women's society it is only the women's society that Walters sees as a major agent in the continued subjugation of women and only the women's society that is incompatible with Christianity. Thus his differing accounts of each society's founding corresponds directly to his divergent view of each society's merits'.¹⁵

In addition to these internal discriminations, which contrast strongly with the uniform presentation of barbarous African societies in the simpler form of the 'release narrative' described above, *Guanya Pau* also incorporates a number of very positive examples of local culture. For example when the 'trite' song of the owl is recorded:

Task done or no done, 'tis time to go home, go
home;
I wear the shoe-boots, and chicken-soup, so
good, so good,
Big dinner at my house tomorrow,
John Bedab, Will Bedab, his wife,
And the Devil knows who all, who all!

Walters shows a real desire to lay the 'local' voice alongside the accepted forms of the invading culture and language in the contrasting quotations from standard mission verse which the text also serves up. Similarly, although the positive nature of the African world is presented finally within a narrative which privileges ideas of development and modernisation, it has a prideful ring which contrasts strongly with the negative tone of the later 'release narratives':

The traveller, away out in the forest, if his provision gives out, need not famish. Almost at any time of the year the woods have a liberal supply of fruits and nuts – walnuts, colanuts, hickory-nuts, troves, several kinds of plums, wild plantain, figs, monkey-apple and fruit, persimmon, lady-finger, alligator-pear and pepper, etc.; if no brook is near, from which to quench his thirst, a large vine can frequently be found that has in its hollow abundant supply of cool, sweet water.

The Africans have not yet awakened to a full consciousness of their worth. It needs only the application of the scientific principles to the illimitable resources of that wonderful land which are lying dormant, to make her rival the most affluent of her sister continents. (67)

However, this important and, in some respects, independent text has a narrative spine identical with that of the more controlled and edited later 'release narratives' transcribed by the mission amanuenses, reminding us that, for all its resistant features to the usual stereotypes of Africa, it still had to meet the expectations of its missionary sponsors.¹⁶ But, unlike the totally negative images of the African societies presented in the majority of the later examples of the form, the world from which *Guanya Pau* flees is depicted as a rich and diverse one, which is marred only by a specific failing, its treatment of women. It is not characterised as a society subject to a general benightedness and barbarity. Importantly, too, the objections to this flaw are voiced by figures within this society, since neither *Guanya Pau* nor her lover Momo,

both of whom object to polygamy, are direct products of Christianisation or of missionary influence. Thus the reformist impulse is presented as self-generated from within the society itself. The text does not lay stress on the missionary presence as offering anything but a distant example of an alternative social structure, and when Guanya runs away it is not, initially at least, in order to reach this alternative world. Most significantly, that alternative world is never reached, except in a symbolic way. At the end of the narrative, Guanya and her companion are detected and are being taken by canoe back to her father. They cast themselves into the river and drown. 'After a minute Guanya Pau came to the surface and said pathetically: "This is preferable to being Kai Kundu's headwife.'" Then she sank to rise again at the last day, when the seas and lakes and rivers shall give up their dead.' Ironically, this ending clearly invokes the closure of the classic 'release narrative' where, as we have seen, baptism (immersion in or anointing by water) is also a form of narrative 'death'.

Guanya Pau shares many other features with the later 'release narratives'. It shows a journey from the pagan world towards a modern, Christian world. It is structured in similar ways, with chapter titles such as 'Caught', 'Escape', and so forth. It presents the mission settlement as a kind of 'H(e)aven' where slavery is overthrown, and where women are treated as individuals and held in respect. However, it employs this form to present a picture of the African past as not just 'redeemable', but also as powerful, complex and valuable in itself. It allows considerable agency to the African in his or her own enlightenment and does not present them simply as the 'object' of redemption. It invokes a future in which the reform of African society is not synonymous with the rejection of its culture and values. It illustrates the way in which the 'release narrative', and the missionary project which brings it into being, can be appropriated to a more specifically local project involving the inscription of African pride and identity as part of a process of modernisation and change.

At the other end of a long process of control by mission presses of African English texts is the way in which twentieth-century nationalists were able to employ the acceptable mission-press genres to generate trends which served their own purposes. A good example of this is Kenyatta's two short works, *My People of Kikuyu* and *The Life of Chief Wangombe* (1942).¹⁷ Again, the form of the 'ethnographic text' and the 'exemplary life', respectively, underpinned these texts. Many ethnographies, some entitled *My People of...*, and accounts of exemplary Christian lives, written by Africans, already existed. These represent a first stage in the appropriation of these European mission genres by Africans. By 1942, they were ready for a more radical appropriation by Kenyatta, in a way which gave them a fresh, ironic emphasis, and a very different politics. The older ethnographic forms do not disappear even at this late date, as a further example from the Africa's Own Library series, by Max Garvie, dated 1944 and entitled *Our People of the Sierra Leone Protectorate*, illustrates. This shows that the emergence of the more radical forms of these genres can not be accounted for simply by the liberalisation of the mission patronage structure. In fact, Kenyatta's text illustrates the increasing tension which, by the early 1940s, was part of the internal contradictions within the

missionary patronage of the African English text. By this time, the missions are far more aware of the possibility of losing control of the text, as the publisher's disclaimer to the Africa's Own Library series suggests:

This series is designed to stimulate Africans to take an interest in reading of the great tribes and personalities of their continent. Many of the books are written by African authors, who as far as possible are left to express their own views in their own words. The Publishers cannot always guarantee the accuracy of what is written, nor do they necessarily associate themselves with the views expressed. Their desire is to afford a medium whereby Africans of education may give their fellows the benefit of their knowledge and research. They are always ready to consider material, especially from African authors.

Kenyatta's text, No. 1 in the series, announces its liberationist project in its dedication to 'the members of various tribes in Africa who died in the service of African peoples'. The two texts it contains are, seemingly, quite separate, echoing the distinctive forms of the ethnography and the 'exemplary life'. But read as appropriations of these forms to a resistant, nationalist purpose, as they surely must be, they form a single political project.

My People of Kikuyu tells of the Gikūyū creation myth and describes the development of the various Gikūyū sub-groups. A social history of the evolution of Gikūyū communal structures follows, including, for example, a description of the change-over from the early matriarchal and polyandrous social form to the later patriarchal and polygamous one. Here we can see Kenyatta's political strategy of appropriating classic anthropological material and forms for a contemporary nationalist purpose. For example, when he describes how the overthrow of the initial patriarchal monarchy initiated a period of popular rule, the modern political project of the text is abundantly clear. In the account, he stresses the mechanisms by which power was handed on from one generation to the next in a formal ceremony, held every thirty or forty years, with an elder group (Irongo) and a younger group (Mwangi) alternating. As a result, the text claims, non-hereditary chieftainships evolved. In this apparently innocent historical account Kenyatta could describe his own struggle as a younger, educated leader against the more entrenched elements of the traditional elders, who continued to support colonial rule. He could also draw attention to the political implications of this tradition for the evolution of a modern, independent, Kenyan political system:

It has been assumed, especially by Europeans who either do not know much about the Kikuyu system of chieftainship or wish to uphold the British Government's method of appointing salaried chiefs for small localities, that the Kikuyu people never had a chief who could command nation-wide respect. This book, however, shows in some detail how before the coming of the Europeans the Kikuyu had reached the stage of overthrowing a despotic monarchy, had established a democratic system, and afterwards evolved out of it a system of democratic chieftainship, supported by strong units of fighting warriors ready to defend the territory. From time immemorial the Kikuyu have always been great lovers of their country, jealous for its fertile soils and beautiful scenery. For this reason they have defended it vigorously against all invaders. (25)

4. Samuel Crowther, *Journal of an expedition up the Niger and Tshadda rivers, undertaken by Maegregor Laird in connection with the British Government in 1854*, ed. by J. F. A. Ajayi, 2nd edn (London: Cass, 1970). All further page references are incorporated into the text.
5. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, p. 159.
6. All the examples given in this section are collected in the tract series *Stories of Africa*, Universities Mission to Central Africa, 9, Dartmouth Street, London. British Museum Catalogue no. BM 4766 aa 19, which contains stories originally written between the 1850s and the turn of the century, with most dealing with East Africa from the 1890s onwards; or in the later Little Book for Africa Series, issued in London by the Sheldon Press between 1925 and 1935. The whole of this latter series is also held in the British Library. Page references given in the text are to these sources.
7. For evidence of this kind of suppression in earlier evangelical narratives see Gillian Whitlock's work on the text of *The History of Mary Prince* in 'Outlaws of the Text: Women's Bodies and the Organisation of Gender in Imperial Space', a paper presented at the Australia/Canada: Post-colonization and Women's Texts Conference, Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 13–16 February 1992. Part of this important but, sadly, still unpublished paper is reproduced in B. Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 349–52.
8. My italics. These internal glosses are interesting both in terms of their stress on the text's intended audience, the 'home' audience which needs to be 'informed', and, even more significantly, as evidence of the intrusive 'voice' of A. F. even within this narrative, itself as we have seen a product of complex control, manipulation and now offered as accurate 'transcription' of Panya's 'own' tale.
9. In fact many of these texts draw on much earlier sources. There is a slippage between the period of production and the period of the events these tracts record. This chronological slippage is a feature of many missionary tracts.
10. See Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, pp. 128ff.
11. *Ibid.*
12. It is most easily consulted in the recent edition by Oyekan Owomoyela, *Guanya Pau: The Story of an African Princess* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). All later page references in the text are to this facsimile edition.
13. J. V. Singler, 'The Day Will Come: J. J. Walters and *Guanya Pau*', *Liberian Studies Journal*, 15, 2 (1990), pp. 125–33. Further references are within the text.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
16. The exact relationship between Walters and his mission sponsors at Oberlin College, and the fact that the work was published by a commercial press, bears further investigation. A full, scholarly edition of this important text is still much needed, since the Owomoyela edition is not properly annotated and has only a very brief introduction.
17. Jomo Kenyatta, *My People of Kikuyu* and *The Life of Chief Wangombe*, Africa's Own Library, No. 1 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942). Later page references are incorporated into the text.

Chapter 4

Twentieth-Century Secular Patronage: Literature, Education, Control

Missionary-controlled presses continued to be a major form of non-indigenous patronage for African English writing during the period between the two world wars, and immediately after the resumption of peace in 1945. But the same period also saw the growth of an awareness by colonial authorities, and by metropolitan commercial publishers, that the increasing number of literate Africans were creating a local market for textbooks and general books. The missionaries had initiated public education in West and East Africa, but in both regions, in the period following the First World War, the colonial authorities began to establish public education systems which sought to regulate, harness and replace the existing missionary institutions. In addition, in line with the general administrative policies which flowed from the Lugardian theory of indirect rule, the colonial authorities in Anglophone Africa also sought to establish government literature bureaux. At first, these bureaux were designed to encourage the spread of literacy in indigenous African languages. Thus, in 1931 Rupert East set up a Translation Bureau in Northern Nigeria, which, as well as supervising the translation of school-texts from English into Hausa, broadened its scope to publish 'two books dealing with the history and customs of the Hausa and their neighbours. This ampler scope became formalised when the institution was turned into a Literature Bureau [this occurred in 1934], which was situated in Zaria, and which deliberately tried to foster Hausa creative writing in the Roman script.'¹

As Graham Furniss has shown, East was also instrumental in establishing an important Hausa-language newspaper, *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo*, which was 'the only Hausa language paper of any note distributed throughout the north since 1938 so that publication in its columns was much sought after'.² Furniss's analysis, in the same article, of the kind of control exercised over this publication makes a fascinating case study in the colonial patronage of African writing.

As East himself records in *Overseas Education* 1940³ the newspaper *Gaskiya* was founded as a successor to the defunct *Northern Provinces news sheet* which had been produced by the Government. East had however gained for the newspaper some independence from Government control, and had appointed a Hausa editor, Abubakar Imam, assisted by an Administrative Officer, L. C. Giles, who could 'provide the raw material for his articles on foreign policy, advise about the selection of local news, deal with printing firms and news agencies, organise the finances'. (48–9)