

## THE TRAVELLER AND HIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HAM MUKASA'S SIR APOLO KAGWA DISCOVERS BRITAIN

Tony E. Afejuku\*

**ABSTRACT:** This is an analysis about a report of a tour written by an Ugandan during his visit to Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th Century. This report shows a critical look about the colonial situation, including a discussion about the English colonial culture and society, whose interest is as historical as anthropological.

**KEY WORDS:** History – English Colonialism – Uganda

### INTRODUCTION

Observers of African literature generally agree that the theme of colonialism dominates it, and will do so for a long time. As Wilfred Cartey, one of its foremost observers, says:

"The theme of colonialism is one of the most persistent notes in African literature and in fact in that of all emerging nations. It appears of historical necessity and will continue to be present in many literatures, for its effects on individuals and societies have been deeply wrenching, precipitating "the falling apart of things"<sup>1</sup>

The African autobiography in whatever form – autobiography proper, memoir, diary or even travel book – has been an inalienable part of the history of colonial Africa and its struggles to free itself from this destructive external force that had threatened its existence as a continent.

\* University of Benin

(1) CARTEY, Wilfred. *Whispers from a Continent: The Literature of Contemporary Black Africa*. New York: Vantage Books, 1969, p. 45.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

The Ugandan Ham Mukasa's *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain*<sup>2</sup> is among the earliest examples of African travel books or diaries ever written; and is important as a useful contribution to the history of the struggles of African people under colonialism. As a diary, it must be controversial, for, in the words of Jane Wilkinson, the "diary, by convention, is written by the self, about the self and for the self alone"<sup>3</sup>. This book, to all intents and purposes, hardly is. Although written by Ham Mukasa, the book is an account of his and his country's Katikiro's (Prime Minister's) journey to Britain, on the invitation of King Edward VII, in 1902. And in fact, in many places the book records the activities of the Prime Minister (Sir Apolo Kagwa), and presents his view points, thus altering its very private nature as a diary by the writing individual, about the writing individual and for the writing individual alone, to rewrite Jane Wilkinson's quotation.

However, although in this essay I will endeavour to examine the style of form of *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* as a travel book or diary, my preposition is to examine Ham Mukasa's (and Sir Apolo Kagwa's) belief that a knowledge of the white conquerors' civilisation and technology will help the transformation of Uganda from a colonial to a modern, progressive state. Because Ham Mukasa's preoccupation in this narrative is not that of an African who sees colonialism as a bad dream from which he is trying to awake, or as a thing that can be successfully fought, the reader cannot but find the book remarkable and intriguing, moreso since it was written at a time in the early twentieth century when other Africans like, for example, Sol Plöätje and Thomas Mofolo of South Africa were busy documenting the vicissitudes of African society at significant points of crisis.

*Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* is neither a protest against colonialism nor an assertion of African culture and values. It was never written to convey the real historical unhappiness of the author's people. The book expresses no anguish, it contains neither raging anger nor boiling emotion nor any abuse and name-calling against the whiteman as is copiously the case in the works of many African writers. In a word, Mukasa's book is atypical. It, however, appears, to teach the reader that

(2) MUKASA, Ham. *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain*, Ed. Taban lo Liyong, Heinemann, 1975. All page references to the text refer to this edition. The narrative was originally edited by the Reverend Ernest Millar who also translated it from Luganda into English; it was initially published in 1904 by Hutchison of London as *Uganda's Katikiro in England*.

(3) WILKINSON, Jane. "African Diaries". In: SABADELL, Doiream Macdermott (ed.) *Autobiographical and Biographical Writing in the Commonwealth*, Barcelona, Editorial AUSA, 1984, p. 248.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

History is the appraisal and reappraisal of past situations, people and their deeds in the light of contemporary experiences in order to guide our choices<sup>4</sup>

An examination of the book's concern clearly reveals that it tends to show that it is needless, even useless, to enter into an open confrontation with the white conquerors.

Ham Mukasa, who was undoubtedly tempered by experience and the advantage of hindsight gained from the British atrocities in Uganda in the 1890's<sup>5</sup>, tends to suggest in his narrative that to learn the white-man's wisdom (which can be used against him later?) rather than a direct attack on him, will serve the interest of his people better. Thus, when Mukasa and his Prime Minister travelled to Britain they saw their visit not as one of mere pleasure, but as one which might enable them to appraise their history and situation generally. As Achebe says through Esoulu in *Arrow of God*: "The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the whiteman today will be saying *had we known tomorrow*"<sup>6</sup>. Esoulu's reason for wanting to "befriend" the whiteman is very rational: when the times change one must change with them. This is responsible pragmatism which Ham Mukasa and his Prime Minister, like Achebe's fictional hero, display to the reader. Because Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa did not want to say "*had we known*" tomorrow they were desirous of learning as much as they could about British culture and technology which they would employ to transform their society. According to Taban lo Liyong, Sir Apolo Kagwa's

Visit to England was... part and parcel of British transformation of Ugandan education, technology, industry, and the cultural landscape generally. As you will read in this book, the visit to England really did fire his imagination (and Mukasa's), and he came back with a great many practical and sensible ideas about the transformation of Uganda. He wasn't

(4) Sir Walter Raleigh as quoted in Taban lo Liyong, "Introduction" to Mukasa, p. xvi.

(5) See, for instance, KIWANUKA, Semakula. *A History of Buganda: From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*. London: Longman, 1971, chaps. 9 and 10. In these chapters Kiwanuka gives accounts of the events - the civil war and British atrocities in Buganda - that in one way or another affected every Muganda of Ham Mukasa's and Sir Apolo Kagwa's generation.

(6) See ACHEBE, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. (1964); rpt. London: Heinemann, 1983, p. 246.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

a sell-out to the whiteman's ways as such, but an 'additionist' – somebody who wanted to add more unto his store...

The same thing can be said of Ham Mukasa. Both he and Sir Apolo Kagwa, in their own view, were intensely nationalistic and patriotic; they were proud of their country and its (pan) history, and their main desire or ideal, as this book reveals, is to make their followmen, their fellow Ugandans, "the best of blackman, and not servile imitations of Europeans"<sup>8</sup>. It was certainly with this grand desire at the back of their minds that they made the historic and epic trip to Britain on the eve of Edward VII's coronation.

Of course throughout their stay in Britain they could not stop admiring, wondering and expressing their perplexity at British technology, industry and civilisation. "Wonderful", "wisdom", "cleverness" are words we find in either Mukasa's or Sir Apolo Kagwa's speeches that express either person's wonder or pleasure at British inventions or hospitality or healthiness:

The next day, July 7th, we went to see the house where books of all kinds are printed..., and saw some wonderfully clever printing presses; you will understand how clever they are when I tell you that the only work that has to be done by hand is to put in the paper; the press prints by itself, takes off the paper itself, inks its own type, and cuts up the paper, and oils itself – all this we saw. And though we had seen many wonderful things, still this was more wonderful, as it did its own work just like a man who has the spirit of life in him, though it was only made by man's wisdom. We were again amazed at the cleverness of the English, which is unending. We went over a great many rooms in which printing work of different kinds was being done, and then went to see the store of books that had been printed. (pp. 90-91)

In this passage British "wonderfulness", "cleverness" and "wisdom" are explicitly shown to the reader. In fact, the words "wonderful" and "clever" are repeatedly used in the passage. Ham Mukasa employs them here to underscore

(7) See Taban lo Liyong's "Introduction" to Mukasa, p. vii.

(8) Sir H.H. Johnston as quoted in Taban lo Liyong, p. vii.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

his and Sir Apolo Kagwa's reluctant acknowledgement of British highly developed and durable technology.

Thus, both men's persistent request or plea for technological specialists and educationalists of all sorts to come and transform Uganda both in "spiritual wisdom and earthly wisdom that is profitable to people in this life" (p. 116), expresses the book's pragmatism and grand conceptions.

One of the most tolling passages of the narrative can be found in its closing paragraphs:

Well, my friends, you should read this book very carefully and attentively, that you may understand what other and wiser lands are like; and though we call these lands wise, you should remember that wisdom does not come to a lazy and weak man, but to one who works hard and thinks daily about his work. Thought and perseverance thus increase a man's wisdom every year and every month. 'He who goes slowly goes far'; 'a cracking sound is not a fire', and a great city is not built in one year. Let us then go ahead slowly and surely; perhaps our grand-children will be much wiser than we are, but we should encourage our children daily to learn all they can, that they may teach their children after we have gone; and so they may go on increasing in wisdom both in the mind and in handicrafts. (p. 159)

This is an optimistic and profound vision of progressive history expressed as far back as 1902. If Ham Mukasa's fellow Ugandans, to whom it was addressed, had made the slightest effort to fulfil it, Uganda today would have been a different Uganda, the pride and glory of all Africa. The intensity of feeling and thought with which Mukasa expressed this vision "capitvates and elevates" the mind and stimulates our emotions. It has a Biblical ring which helps to heighten its effect on us. It is as if Mukasa is offering some incantatory prayer spiced with rich imagery and proverbs from the oral tradition: "He who goes slowly goes far", "a cracking sound is not a fire". Both proverbs are used here to emphasise the book's historical perspective. No nation can progress if her peoples are not prepared patiently to work hard to make the necessary sacrifices.

What emerges from the discussion so far is that Ham Mukasa gives the reader the impression that members of the traditional ruling class and the majority of his people enjoyed British rule as there is no explicit hint in his

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *Africa: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

narrative to the contrary. But the book, it must be said, contains Mukasa's and Sir Apolo Kagwa's subtle attack on colonialism and neo-colonialism:

In the evening the man who wanted to come to our country to plant bark-cloth trees came to see us, and asked us the best places for planting them, so that he might purchase the land or rent it: however, letting a rich man rent one's land is the same thing as selling it unless one is very clever. (p. 135)

In this view of Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa the reader can easily see "the scourge of post-independence Africa: foreign investments and foreign aid in the neo-colonial era." Indeed, the view Ham Mukasa and his Katikiro express here reinforces the idea that they are patriotic "additionists: although they need the ideas and help of the whiteman to launch their country into the realm of technological progress and civilisation, they are not prepared to sell their country in order to achieve this. And this, it must be emphasised, is an important point to make for Ham Mukasa's and Sir Apolo Kagwa's commitment, trustworthy patriotism and nationalism, and for the narrative's claim to intense national significance.

Some critics may object that the narrative has any claim to national significance; that Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa are committed, trustworthy patriots and nationalists; they may believe that Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa are stooges of the colonial masters and betrayers of their people. In fact, the notable Ugandan historian Semakula Kiwanuka thinks that Sir Apolo Kagwa and his associates, that is, his fellow ruling chiefs in Uganda of the 1890s, were nothing but lucky upstarts, opportunists and collaborators with the colonial masters<sup>9</sup>. Kofi Awoonor, the Ghanaian novelist and critic, echoes the same opinion when he says in his *The Breast of the Earth* that "upstarts and smart alecs, whom the British knew could be used in carrying out their programmes in return for certain privileges and compensations were made chiefs. Powerful established chiefs such as.... the Kabaka of Buganda and their elders, who saw this [indirect rule] as a degradation of the institution and opposed it, were swiftly punished"<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, people like Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa may be

(9) See Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda*, p. 265-66.

(10) AWOONOR, Kofi. *The Breast of the Earth*. A Survey of the History Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1978, p. 19

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *Africa: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

"upstarts and smart alecs", but they, unlike their Kabaka, were able to grasp the colonial situation adequately. They were clever men who were re-defining their lives and roles in a period of conflict. Thus, however much Awoonor and Kiwanuka may resent their "opportunism", Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa "rendered service to their country that promoted the idea of progress"<sup>11</sup>. How they tried to do this is what *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* is about. In this respect, *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* differs from such overtly committed African autobiographies and diaries like the Nyasan (Malawian) George Simeon Mwase's *Strike a Blow and Die*<sup>12</sup> and the black South African Sol T. Plaatje's *Boer War Diary*<sup>13</sup>, two narrative among many others whose reconstruction of the pre-colonial past, graphic chronicling of the struggle against colonialism and documentation of the vicissitudes of African society at significant points of crisis are as eloquent as they are inspiring.

At this point it seems appropriate and necessary to discuss Ham Mukasa's narrative style as we need it to enrich our discussion. Structurally, the book is a remarkable fulfilment of the diary-travel-biography; that is, a work that diurnally records the activities and experiences of the writing individual, and which also chronicles and records the actions of another individual who is the writing individual's travelling companion and subject. The proximity of author (Ham Mukasa) and subject (Sir Apolo Kagwa) whom the former serves as secretary throughout their journey) is such that informs us about the close correspondence of author (diarist) and subject ("biographe"). Ham Mukasa's account of their journey is a "lovingly recorded detail which effectively recreates the experiences which subject and author shared"<sup>14</sup>.

It is difficult to decide whether the book is solely Ham Mukasa's or purely Sir Apolo Kagwa's although Mukasa's original title "Uganda's Katikiro in England" and the present one, "Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain" tend to indicate that it is purely Sir Apolo Kagwa's. We know, however, from Ham Mukasa's manner of narration and the rapport between him and Sir Apolo Kagwa that the book is not purely and simply a biography. Even if it is a kind of biography about Sir Kagwa's "discovery of Britain", it is still ultimately, an

(11) Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda*, p. 266.

(12) MWASE, George Simeon. *Strike a Blow and Die*. (ed. Robert I. Rotberg), London: Heinemann, 1975. Rotberg and his wife discovered this narrative in 1962. As a typescript it bore the title "A Dialogue of Nyasaland of Past Events, Environments & the Present Outlook within the Protectorate".

(13) Sol T. Plaatje's diary was discovered in 1969 and edited by John L. Cormaroff (London: Macmillan, 1973).

(14) SHELSTON, Alan. *Biography*. London: Methuen, 1979, p. 40.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

expression of its author's own thoughts, view and sensibility. In other words, Mukasa's "biography" of his Prime Minister becomes Mukasa's "autobiography" or "personal" diary of the "discovery" of Britain.

Throughout the narrative the first person singular narrative pronoun 'I' and the first person plural narrative 'We' are used to narrate the story. When the author is narrating events that are solely witnessed by him, he uses the first person singular pronoun 'I' but if the event(s) is/are witnessed by him and the Katikiro together he uses the first person plural pronoun 'We'. For events that are witnessed solely by the Katikiro he merely makes a report of them after the Katikiro tells him about them. The following three passages help to illuminate the above three patterns the author uses to tell and develop his narrative.

Firstly;

The next morning Captain Hobart took the Katikiro to Ascot, the place where the horses race, and Mr. Millar and I went to a great many shops. I saw a wonderful house where people store their money (National Safe Deposit Company), which has been very cleverly built of extremely hard steel; it is built with two circular walls which are extremely strong, one of stone, the other of burnt brick. The doors are very strong, and as thick as a hand's breadth, and close by themselves, and no man is able to open them, or to out through the circular wall of stone or of burnt bricks, which are very hard. (p. 62)

Secondly;

After this we went to have lunch with Dr. B.W. Walker, the brother of Archdeacon Walker the friend of Ham Mukasa, and he cooked a fine luncheon to welcome us, and took us all over his house to show us what it was like: we noticed that the kitchen was on the lowest floor..... Later on we went to see over a children's school, and when we arrived they took us all over it, and showed us how they were taught to read and to do arithmetic, to do carpenters' work and to swim, to jump and to run and to look like ladies and married peoples, to keep the house in order, to wash clothes,

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África:Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

to make beds properly, and to wash up every thing that requires washing when it is dirty; to sweep out the house, and to do every kind of work that people must learn to do for themselves. (p. 63)

Finally;

The next morning, June 19th, they took the Katikiro (on Lord Onslow's motor-car) to see the statue of king Albert and of those who were great men in his time (Albert Memorial); this is not the Albert who is king at present, but one of a long time ago. The Katikiro told me this when he got back, and I wrote it down. (p. 63)

In each of the above passages it is Ham Mukasa's thoughts and points of view that we see, not his subject's, not the Katikiro's whose "biography" he is writing. In the first passage we see that it is Ham Mukasa alone who visited the National Deposit Company, and the view expressed about the tight security of the place is his alone. In the passage we see his keen sense of observation, which he demonstrates throughout the narrative, at work. In the second passage the event and activity reported are jointly witnessed by him, the Katikiro and others, but it is his views, thoughts and observation, not the Katikiro's or the others', that we also see to be reported here. In other words, we see here a movement from a collective 'we' that engages in an action and activity to a submerged singular 'I' that express its opinions and views about this action and activity that the collective 'we' which the 'I' is a part of participated in. Even in the third passage where Ham Mukasa is making a secondhand report of what his subject informs him about, we still get the impression that his opinion is paramount, not his and the Katikiro's joint-opinion. Ham Mukasa is writing his own personal account of his visit, not his Prime Minister's, to Britain.

A point must be made, however, that since it is the Prime Minister who throughout the visit is the centre of attraction by virtue of the fact that he is the one invited to Britain, and furthermore, since he is the one who is higher in rank, socially and otherwise, than Ham Mukasa, traditional Ugandan protocol and etiquette makes it imperative for him to receive pride of place in Mukasa's narrative. It is for this reason, I think, that the narrative bears the title that focuses (our) attention on the Katikiro Sir Apolo Kagwa even though the narrative

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

appears to be less 'his' than Ham Mukasa's. The argument thus is that Mukasa's cultural context somehow affects his manner of writing.

But perhaps we can blame Ham Mukasa after-all for giving too much prominence and emphasis to his own opinions and sensibilities in a book that was supposed to be 'co-authored' by him and his Prime Minister? Taban lo Liyong said that Sir Apolo Kagwa dan Ham Mukasa mutually agreed "to keep a diary of their exploration with Mukasa doing the writing of what had been jointly discussed or witnessed"<sup>15</sup>. To agree with lo Liyong is to suggest that the book is a 'joint-diary', a suggestion which is belied by the fact that Mukasa wrote the book. And in any case, in this edition of his, Taban lo Liyong does not attribute the authorship to both Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa.

It seems appropriate to stress here that although *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* is about Ham Mukasa's (and his Katikiro's) belief that a knowledge of European civilization and technology will help the transformation of Uganda from a colonial to a progressive state, the style of the narrative as is obvious from the foregoing discussion does not suggest the author's conscious imitation of early nineteenth century European writing. The style is not derivative and cannot be said to be "padded" Edwardian style in the manner Sol Plaatje's (the renowned black South African writer and contemporary of Ham Mukasa and Sir Apolo Kagwa), for example, has been derided as 'padded' "Victorian" style<sup>16</sup>. It is a testimony to Ham Mukasa's narrative skill that despite the difficulties which faced black and African writers at a time when "slavish imitation"<sup>17</sup> of the whites in all things including the act and art of writing was the vogue, he could still write (in his indigenous language) this distinctive narrative which, as I have said, is a remarkable fulfilment of the diary-travel-biography.

However, the real attraction of the narrative is seen in Ham Mukasa's (and Sir Apolo Kagwa's) impressively patriotic, nationalistic and wisely accomodating spirit. He, like his Katikiro, as we have seen, welcomes western-oriented values in this society, but he is far from being a senseless xenophile or blind advocate of foreign cultures. At least, for him or Sir Apolo

(15) Taban lo Liyong, "Introduction" to Mukasa, p. v..

(16) See Tim Couzens., "Introduction" to Plaatje's *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 12. *Mhudi* was probably written in 1917 although it was first published in Lovedale, South Africa by Lovedale Press in 1930.

(17) COUZENS p. 12.

AFEJUKU, Tony E. The traveller and historical context: Ham Mukasa's Sir Apolo Kagwa discovers Britain. *África: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 14-15 (1): 3-13, 1991/1992.

Kagwa, learning about the whiteman's ways is one way of safeguarding the African traditional institutions from the powerful conquerors. Thus, although his and Sir Apolo Kagwa's response towards colonialism is a-typical of the general response in the continent, it nevertheless was motivated by a love of the land or of the people. This is one reason why *Sir Apolo Kagwa Discovers Britain* does not fail to sustain its interest. At this point an additional concluding remark is hardly necessary.

RESUMO: Trata-se de um ensaio sobre um relato de viagem escrito por um ugandense em visita à Grã-Bretanha nos primeiros anos do século XX. Neste ensaio revela-se um olhar crítico sobre a situação colonial, inclusive uma discussão da cultura e da sociedade colonial inglesa, cujo interesse é ao mesmo tempo histórico e antropológico.