

Manipulation of Subject People's History, Legends and Myths: the Case of *Prester John*

Memory Chirere, University of Zimbabwe; Jairos Kangira, Polytechnic of Namibia

Introduction

This article claims that John Buchan's *Prester John*, a small novel of 1910 can be read, arguably, as a settler novel setting out to undercut the indigenous Africans' wars of resistance and self-determination by manipulation of myths, legends and history. The claim is also that this novel by the private secretary to the British High Commissioner to South Africa belittles the Africans' claim to connections with their legendary ancestral heroes. There is a contrived, systematic denigration of "the black other" at the frontier so that he appears as if he has no meaningful claim to a history of organisation to fall back on. As savages, Africans are rendered blind, leaderless and motiveless. All that is done to benefit the Empire. Some extensive supporting examples will be drawn from Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. However, in the process of denigrating the Africans, John Buchan is caught up in some contradictions. All this demonstrates that the colonial process itself was/is complex even to its perpetrators, as shall be shown here.

The Novel

Prester John appeared in 1910, a date between 1890 and 1920, notable for a series of African wars of resistance (rebellions) in Southern and Central Africa.

It is therefore befitting that T. J. Couzens thinks that *Preston John* could be based on one of, some of, or, all of the Southern African Wars or resistance (rebellions): the 1906 Bambatha rebellion, the Makgatho 1850-90 wars of resistance in the Zoutpansberg, the Ndebele-Shona Risings of 1896-7, the Magoeba rebellion of Magoebaskloof in 1895 and the Malapoch rebellion of Transvaal of 1894.¹ G. Shepperson and T. Price associate *Prester John* specifically with the Bambatha rebellion.²

What is important to assert, from the onset, is that the above rebellions, despite their being crushed by the settler, were expressions of the black people's desire for self-determination. That Buchan draws heavily from them, invites us to examine the way he lays down his images in relation with what could actually have occurred. With *Prester John*, Buchan is not writing "scientific" history, of course, but Art expresses the Artist's viewpoint and that of the people on his ideological side.

The *Prester John* legend

Central to the novel is the *Prester John* legend, which it will be argued here; Buchan manipulates to denigrate the Africans. According to M. Z. Malaba, who shares the same view of denigration, *Prester John* is a legendary medieval character, a king priest "whose rule was characterised by justice, peace and plenty" (and more importantly):

he (Prester John) specifically desired to humble arrogant Western rulers and teach them how to rule meekly and justly. Although Prester John was originally associated with “the three Indies”, he was later also associated with rulers of Ethiopia.³

For David Crawford and Captain Arcoll and the other settlers in the novel, the concern is that a black man, Laputa, has risen in Natal, “claiming to be a successor to *Prester John* in all his nobility and grandeur and would like to drive away the settlers in an “African for Africans” fashion of the original *Prester John*. Laputa’s mainstay is the name “Prester John” and the necklace Prester John allegedly left behind which has gone round the African tribes, at times, causing disputes.

Buchan is clearly aware that a rallying point, a myth or a common history drives most uprisings in any historic period. In this case, it is *Prester John*. Immediately and with open hostility, Buchan’s always “well intending” white characters, David and Arcoll, set out to undercut the *Prester John* myth. Arcoll’s long account of *Prester John* deliberately turns the legend into a pagan myth, the way the settler discourse(s) would have it, of course:

He (Prester John) was a sort of Christian, but I expect that his practices were as Pagan as his neighbors. There is no doubt that he was a great conqueror. Under him and his successors, the empire of Ethiopia extended far South...⁴

And on how long this power lasted, Arcoll throws in more darkness and mystery, to cast further doubt on this myth that had become a powerful rallying point for the Africans:

...no scholar has ever been able to fathom. Anyhow, the centre of authority began to shift southwards, and the warrior tribes moved in that direction...⁵

Involving the incredible wide range of tribes and kingdoms of “the Mazimba”, “the Makaranga”, “the Monomotapa” and “the Zulu”, a Prester John fetish ended up in the hands of the Zulus and did not stop to wreck havoc:

They brought more than a creed with them (the Zulus). Somehow or other, (some fetish had descended from Prester John) by way of the Mazimba and Angoni and Makaranga. What it is, I do not know, but it was always in the hands of the tribe which for the moment held the leadership. The great native wars of the sixteenth century... were not for territory but for leadership and mainly for the possession of this fetish... Chaka... a sort of Black Napoleon early in the last century, and he made the Zulus the paramount power in South Africa ... he had the fetish, whatever it was ... Mosilikatse tried to steal it and that was why he had to fly.⁶

The whole Prester John legend has been tarnished by dark associations, the trail of blood letting caused by disputes over it and the unbelievably varied tribes and kingdoms associated with it. John Laputa, who associates himself with Prester John is, therefore, by implication, embracing a lie in order to further personal ambitions. M. Z. Malaba responds:

[This] is hideously reductive analysis of the dynamics of African politics. The various African empires that came into being are not seen in terms of growth of or transition nation states, with all the attendant problems but African history is contemptuously dismissed as endless slaughter in search of fetish.⁷

One would think that since Laputa is a Christian Reverend, David and Arcoll would see a contradiction in Laputa's "unchristian" behaviour. But, imagining that there is a contradiction in Laputa's behaviour would be doing the "nigger" a favour. In the first chapter to the novel, the Scottish society has actually been shocked to see a native preach in a Christian church and "oddly", about race equality before God! Tam Dyke, David's childhood friend, makes a comment that is arguably representative of the white elders' view about a nigger-preacher:

It's all nonsense, Davie. The Bible says that the children of Ham were to be our servants. If I were the minister I wouldn't let a nigger into the pulpit. I wouldn't let him further than the Sabbath School.⁸

The conversation in which the quote (above) has been taken, confirm with the license of the author, the idea that "niggers" cannot do anything in the name of preaching. Already, an ordained Reverend is denied the very position and role of his ordination.

Prester John and Ethiopianism

It is that denigration that led to rebellions driven by African church leaders. Pastor Chilembwe of Nyasaland led one such church oriented rebellion in 1915. Such an idea is called "Ethiopianism" and it could be at work in John Laputa. It was a response sparked by the black church leaders' realisation that Africans have a spiritual equality with whites, which they are denied. Arcoll tells David that Laputa could be preaching the Christian Gospel on the surface but in reality fermenting ideas of rebellion.⁹

Ethiopianism which originated from Negro American churches was brought to Africa by preachers like Chilembwe, who had come into contact with it at school in Virginia in America.¹⁰ As P. A. Bruce states, the black preacher, after seeing continuous segregation against the blacks, was in the best position to ferment revolutionary ideas:

The preachers of the Negroes are their most active politicians as a rule, they have much political influence for they constitute, ... natural leaders of their race, ... The two parts of minister and orator are played so skillfully at one and the same time that it is impossible to distinguish them.¹¹

In *Prester John*, Ethiopianism is hinted at and acknowledged but Buchan undermines it by the use of subtle turn of events and open inartistic twists of fate. For instance, Laputa's army's advance is disturbed at Dupree's Drift by mere targetless shots from Arcoll's men.

Secondly, Laputa's men, who are carrying out their plot brilliantly, cannot fight back a half-heartedly ambush because they are, strangely, under an oath not to shed blood "from the hour of midnight till sunrise on the second day."¹² As if that is not already senseless enough, Buchan allows David to lure away Laputa from his army single handed, thereby leaving his soldiers with no commander. This subsequently leads to Laputa's death and defeat. Davis's success belongs to the world of make-believe. He is, one might argue, the little biblical David winning against Laputa (Goliath). Laputa is marooned by David in enemy territory with and Arcoll's men chase him across the plains to his death. He is an anti-hero. This is in contrast with Laputa's historical equal, Bambatha, whom Buchan should definitely be aware of.

By making Lupata fall, Buchan is trying to shatter the Bambatha and the Prester John legends and yet, Bambatha, as S. Marks observes, is a milestone in the history of African wars of resistance:

To modern African Nationalists, Bambatha has become a great national hero and he attempted to unite behind him the chiefs and people of many tribes ... he has prepared to die fighting ... According to estimation, his force consisted of twelve to fourteen companies – seven hundred to one thousand men ... joined by other chiefs, Ndube, Mpumela and Makubalo.¹²

Other examples

The undercutting of the Africans' claim to meaningful religious backing in their rebellions and wars of resistance is done with more hidden symbolism in Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, another novel of Empire. From the point the three white men in Umbopa's company arrive in Kukuanaaland, up until the end, Gagool, the African priestess, is aware that the men are up to no good. She is clearly hostile to their presence and more than once, recommends their immediate execution. However, the whole Kukuanaaland, Twala included, are made to believe that, the travelers are Gods from the skies, the travelers' gun are spiritual, invincible weapons and that the white men can cause eclipses. That only Gagool can see the visitors for what they really are, but fail to convince her people, is a way in which Haggard is mocking the African religious institution for not being one with the people it purports to serve. Gagool, up to the end, is a desperate priestess and her failure to convince Twala leads to latter's fall. At best, Gagool can only kill innocent girls and die under the rock, which only she knows how its lever is operated.

A religion that cannot communicate, goes the implication, has outlived itself and cannot face up to the new challenges. The Kukuanaas had better turn to Umbopa and in addition, to the obviously impeding Christianity and the new Western tolerant rule.

Even the idea that, when defeat is obvious, Twala is made to refer to an old Kukuana tradition that he should be given a last man-to-man duel, is an attempt to mock African traditions. It is no accident that Haggard makes Twala pick on Henry as his duel opponent. In that fight, Twala is going to stand for the African physique and fetishism. Henry, with the help of the European medieval knight's armour, represents the "great", all conquering European traditions. Indeed, Henry slaughters Twala. Europe, goes the implication, has defeated Africa of dark, useless, worn out traditions.

Even the prototype European settler novel, Robinson Crusoe, bases its foundations on having the non-Europeans coming across as cannibals. The non-European causes the European reader some disgust. Cannibalism in the adventure tale, as M. Green argues, is "heavily stressed" and "is the archetype of everything monstrous and appalling in primitive cultures."¹³

It is important to note that the European writer is not only bent on undercutting the subject people's religiosity, but, where necessary even to appropriate to European and Asian history, everything complex about African religious practices. That refusal to acknowledge any depth and meaning in the African religions is very evident. For instance, when the cave priest in Prester John speaks, in a trance to Laputa, David, with Buchan's insight, thinks the language used is not African:

The tongue I did not know, and I doubt if my neighbours (the Africans in the cave) were in a better case. It must have been some old sacred language – Phoenician, Sabaeen, I know not what – which has survived in the rite of the snake.¹⁴

In *King Solomon's Mines* there is a suggestion that the infrastructure developments in Kukuanaaland (the road, for instance) were authored by the great historical figure, Solomon of the Middle East and not the “savage” Kukuanas or their ancestors. The three sculptured figures in the cave, the narrative quickly appropriates to the Christian Bible and Israel:

Whilst I was gazing and wondering, suddenly it occurred to me – being familiar with the Old Testament – that Solomon went astray after strange Gods, the names of three of whom I remembered – “Ashtoreth, the Goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh, the God of the Moabites and Milcom, the God of the children of Ammon”¹⁵

And as if that determined speculation is not enough, more authenticity comes from the most learned of the three Europeans, Henry:

“Hum,” said Sir Henry, who is a scholar, having taken a high degree in classics at college, “there may be something in that Ashtoreth of the Hebrews was the Astarte of the Phoenicians, who were the great traders of Solomon’s time. Astarte ... was represented with horns ... and there on the brow of the female and distinct horns. Perhaps these colossi were designed by some Phoenician officials who managed the mines. Who can say”¹⁶

There is, outside fiction, suggestion that King Solomon’s Mines could have been inspired by stories Haggard heard about religious centres like the Matopos and the Zimbabwe Ruins, North of the Limpopo. The same source indicates that Haggard believed that the Zimbabwe Ruins were/are works of the Phoenicians and not the Bantu people.¹⁷

Although the debate on who built the ruins is still on today, Haggard’s case remains an example of appropriation, meant to disassociate blacks with any complexity and genius.

Much to the dislike of Haggard ideological successors, Peter Garlake argues that the ruins were a Shona (African) religious centre, revered and containing religious artefacts like the monoliths and the curved birds.¹⁸ Even if the ruins’ religious significance could be questioned, T. N. Huffman asserts the idea that the ruins, could have been built by non-Bantu is extremely remote. According to him, the Shonas (Africans) have an earlier association with the ruins than any other race.¹⁹ This points at Haggard’s attempt to denigrate Africans.

Defining Laputa

Buchan’s *Prester John* dismisses Laputa the Reverend, but one is conscious of the problems the white characters have with the concept “Laputa the western educated man, the widely travelled man.” Laputa, along other Africans, has been denigrated, but his case is a demonstration that Buchan’s black-white binarism has its contradictions.

It is noticeable that David reveres Laputa for preaching to the white folks without qualms, for speaking grammatically correct English and for mobilising his forces in

the method of the modern western generals. To David and Arcoll, Laputa becomes ambivalent. He is a genius but settler ideology renders him less human because he is a black man. Captain Arcoll's hate-love settler ideological contradiction is demonstrated by his talk about Laputa:

The biggest thing [Laputa] that the kaffirs have ever produced. I tell you, in my opinion, he is a great genius. If he had been white, he might have been a second Napoleon He has the heart of a poet and a king, and it is God's curse that he has been born among the children of Ham. I hope to shoot him lime a dog ... but I am glad to bear testimony to his greatness.

Western educated blacks terrify Europeans. Their being "educated" shatters the settler myth that the native mind is not complex. However, that the settler thinks that western education for blacks leads to no "good" but destruction, is another way of denying that blacks can meaningful related with western or any form of education. That learned blacks are quick to rebel is seen as a fault and not a logical development. A white man writing in the "Central African Times" in 1906, after the Bambatha rebellion, complains that some learned blacks were refusing manual tasks specifically because:

... education makes the native aspire to something better and hence must be discouraged, because cheap labour is the main consideration at the present time. (And) Noone should be kind to natives. They do not understand it, they do not wish it, and it is not good for them.²¹

It is no wonder that when the rising is suppressed in *Prester John*, the native college that is set up at Blaauwukderbeestfontein, is strictly a technical college, not an academic or missionary institute which breeds "dangerous" ideas. According to M. Z. Malaba, this confirms that myth that blacks are destined to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. These are the children of Ham who should not aspire to great heights.²²

Buchan does not see a situation where black and white co-exists. He is another Albert Schweitzer, who thinks that the "nigger" is the white man's young brother. In 1903, Buchan was to write, in "In the African Colony: Studies in the Reconstruction":

We have two races (black and white) physically different socially incapable of amalgamation ... there is no possibility of a United States, if we bridge it carelessly, the possibility is still more distant...²³

Conclusion

It is clear that Buchan denigrates the blacks in *Prester John*, by showing what he thinks is the blacks' fragile, if not false religiosity. However, and maybe unknown to Buchan, the contradiction is that, at least, he has depicted the blacks as having the "cheek" to rebel and rise. Buchan misses the implicit message in Schreiner's Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland that there is something savage, unchristian and ungodly in exterminating a people because they claim and demonstrate a desire for self-determination. He also does not see, unlike Conrad, that there is also "darkness" in the mind, spirit and activities of colonialists in Africa.

Footnotes

1. T. J. Couzens, *The Old Africa of a Boy's Dream*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1981, pp 8-12.
2. G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent Africa*, Edinburg University Press, Edinburg, 1958, pp 145-267.
3. M. Z. Malaba in B. J. Vickey (ed) *Palaver*, 2-3, Univerisyt of Lecce, Lecce, 1984, 199, pp 29-36.
4. J. Buchan, *Prester John*, Thomas Nelson and Sons (Ltd), London, 1938, pp 85-90.
5. *Ibid*, J. Buchan, pp 95-90.
6. *Ibid*, J. Buchan, pp 85-90.
7. *Op cit*, M. Z. Malaba
8. *Op cit*, J. Buchan, p 14.
9. A. J. Chennells, *Dphil Thesis: "Settler Myths and the Southern Rhodesian Novel"*, University of Zimbabwe, 1982, p 342.
10. P. A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro As A Free Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1968, p 420
11. *Op cit*, J. Buchan, p 125.
12. S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, Claredon Press, Oxford, 1970, p 20.
13. M. Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, Basic Books, New York, 1979, p 80.
14. *Op cit*, J. Buchan, p 124-5.
15. H. R. Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*, Collins Press, London, 1885, pp 207-8.
16. *Ibid*, Haggard, pp 207-8.
17. R. L. Green, *Introduction to H. R. Haggard King Solomon's Mines*, Collins Press, London, 1885, 13-19.
18. P. Garlake in G. Connah (ed) *African Civilisation: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p 18.
19. T. N. Huffman, "The Rise and Fall of Great Zimbabwe", *Journal of African History*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1972, p 356.
20. *Op cit*, J. Buchan, pp 85-90.

21. Op cit, G. Shepperson, p 145
22. Op cit, M. Z. Malaba.
23. D. Daniell, *The Interpreters' House*, Thomas Nelson and Sons (Ltd), London, 1978, p 95.

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