EPILOGUE: REFLECTIONS ON PERSONHOOD THROUGH THE EYES OF A.C. JORDAN'S *THE WRATH OF ANCESTORS*

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INTRODUCTION

When I started interrogating the idea of personhood, especially in Africa, it became clear to me that African literature, particularly foundational narratives, have always been concerned with contestations around the idea of personhood—what it means to come into being; how Africans are located in their world and indeed the totality of the universe within which Africans find themselves. A major pre-occupation has been with how Africans define themselves in their world and what forms of ontological outlook inform this world. The concern was particularly more urgent among those foundational writers of African literature who located their craft between the difficult periods of colonial occupation and its immediate aftermath. They had to wrestle with what it meant to be human against the onslaught on their personal dignity both as individuals and as a race. Indeed, a cursory glance at Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1940/1980), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep not, Child* (1964), Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966), Ferdinand

Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966), Es'kia Mphalele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959), and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946)—to name but a few—shows that the thematic thrust of these narratives was restoration—returning the black people's humanity to themselves. This is to say that the framing of the black people's lives by the colonialists worked to deny the humanity of blacks. The two theorists that have been so central to the restoration project; of awakening a black consciousness in the minds and soul of blacks are Frantz Fanon (1965) and Steve Biko (1978). Separated by almost two decades, the two theorists would insist that the greatest project confronting the black race today is the violence inflicted on the psyche of the colonised black subjects—a psyche of inferiority. It is for this reason that Fanon (1965, 32 – 33) would insist that, "the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary".

It is not, therefore, surprising that anti-colonial literature's thematic thrust always swivelled around identities. Much of this contestation was often described as a contestation around culture; hence a preponderance of the so-called themes of cultural conflict in foundational narratives. On critical reflection, it has become evident that much of this contest was really a contest around personhood—what it means to be human and what goes into that process of becoming a person. It was really about what defines a humane person and those processes through which what we call persons come into being. That is why, for many Africans, the interpellation of Africans into colonial modernity as colonial subjects was really the anti-thesis of being human and an erosion of personhood. The cry of anguish by Toundi, the protagonist in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966, 4), 'Brother, what are we? What are we blackmen who are called French?', speaks to the erosion of the black peoples' humanity under colonialism. The irony is that Toundi leaves his home to join Fr Gilbert at the church mission on the eve of his circumcision, an initiation ritual into his community, thereby staging a rejection of his people's culture. His dehumanization before he dies is both physical and psychical. Beaten and left to die allegedly for meddling in the sexual affairs of the colonial officials, we read: 'He was already rotten before he died' (95). The rot is more than physical because it is a

metaphor for utter humiliation—total debasement of this ironic figure at the height of colonialism in French West Africa. The delusionary description of himself when he is hailed into white modernity here is apt: 'The dog of the king is the king of dogs'.

Although Toundi's cry of disillusionment is directed at the hollowness of assimilation in the context of French colonialism, it is also a sharp critique of the European idea of personhood, embedded as it were on the idea of a free and intentional subject, autonomous and independent of the trappings of communal networks. It turns a mocking gaze at colonial modernity rooted in the rise and triumph of instrumental reason, celebrated in Europe as the ultimate signifiers of personhood. The twin warheads of reason and autonomy undermined the African idea of connectedness of human beings—a relational quality that not only connects people to people, but equally to the totality of the environment and the universe—the living and the dead (ancestors), land and a supreme being, among others.

My point is that African literature in its broadest sense has tended to engage with these issues, and that is the contestation around personhood and identity in Africa. Their starting point was that we are dealing with an injured continent and an injured people and therefore the questions they sought to ask were always going to be political and philosophically insurrectionist—seeking to explain, but also searching for a radical rupture.

In this concluding note, deliberately called 'epilogue', I want to focus on A. C. Jordan's novel, *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, largely because of the complex manner in which I believe it engages with competing ideas of personhood at a particular moment in Africa's history without being neither sentimental nor idealistic. It is a pragmatic approach, which was partly defined by the historical contingencies of his time, but also a deep understanding of his people's history and culture. A. C. Jordan, like the rest of the foundational writers in Africa, is grappling with precisely these issues and doing so at a turning point in African society. Many such moments exist in South Africa's journey and indeed in the history of the colonised in Africa generally. These are moments worthy of deep reflection, not only to identify the way African philosophy and knowledge systems have grappled with them, but also to register how they have adapted in these instances.

Originally published in Xhosa in 1940 by Lovedale Press, it stands out as the first real novel in Xhosa. It was later translated into

English by A. C. Jordan himself, with the help of his sister, Pricilla P. Jordan. As many critics have noted, it is a historical narrative of epical proportions. Although often cast as a historical narrative, the novel is also profoundly human in its thematic concerns. It is a story about tradition as much as it is a story about a community in transition—a society in the cusp for change. At the risk of oversimplifying the plot, it is a story of a young Mpondomise prince who reluctantly leaves the University College of Fort Hare before completing a semester and goes back to the land of his ancestors to take his place as king of the Mpondomise. His ideas prove to be too far ahead of those of the people he has to lead, and his reign ends tragically and prematurely. On the surface of it, the text reads like a story about a clash of cultures—the clash between the so-called traditional and modern values—a familiar thematic thread that runs across a number of foundational narratives in Africa. Indeed, Jordan is adept at giving us a sharp juxtaposition between church-people and those holding traditional beliefs; school people as opposed to red ochre people; boarding school activities and the *inkundla* or assembly at the royal palace. While drawing attention to these historical and social tensions besetting a society in transition, Jordan does not pass judgement, but instead allows the readers to assess for themselves the impact of what is presented as a confrontation between two human and historical civilisations. The text is fundamentally about how societies can manage or mismanage historical change to the detriment of their own existence as individuals and as a community.

My interest though is in how this text, which speaks to two streams of human history, works to unsettle fixed ideas of personhood, while equally addressing itself to the enduring value of the everyday, especially the spiritual and ritualistic practices of the community. They draw on these symbolic structures in order to shape their daily lives, social and political institutions. In this novel, Jordan draws attention to two streams of personhood in tension, while pointing to a possibility of compromise, of a third space within which personhood could be formulated as a constant negotiation between competing versions of human history.

Firstly, Jordan presents us with a compelling story of a community whose history and social relations has been defined by interdependence and a social hierarchy that emphasises this connectedness and the social, political and moral obligations of those who live in it. And although they are by no means equal, the social

obligations that bind these people together would seem to supersede individual autonomy. And so when the young prince is called upon to abandon his university studies to return home in keeping with the wishes of his late father, he is torn between obeying his own personal strivings and ambitions and the burden that his community has placed on him. It is both a moral and political obligation all rolled into one. This is what the Bishop tells him when he goes to discuss his impending decision to stop his studies and follow his father's will to lead his people:

> My son, though I am a white man, I have lived among Africans for a long time and I have a deep respect for some of their customs. I know that among your people the wishes of the dead—especially of a parent—are sacred (Jordan 1980, 38).

Signalled here is a relational quality that not only points to the young Prince's obligation to his people, but also more importantly to the ancestors, his late father's wishes. One could argue that in taking the bold step to reclaim his crown in keeping with the wishes of his late father, the princess was re-establishing some harmony in the disconnected relationship between the living and the dead. When he decides that he will choose and pick what he can honour (e.g. marrying outside his father's wish), he is creating disequilibrium.

Jordan is at pains to draw a very strong communal ethos at work in this society; an ethos that is nevertheless rooted in intricate and complex symbolic structures; myth and magic; ancestral reverence and the whole ecological system. In this community, the symbolic structure and its associated mythology is embodied in the snake that the Queen mother detests and finally kills. *Majola*, the mole snake is perceived as the watchful eye over babies. We read that *Majola* is,

> The snake that visits babies when they are born. It never harms the baby or members of the family and the only friendly way to drive it away is for mother to squirt it with her own breast milk. It visits the baby to prepare it for a successful and safe adult life. It comes as a friend and protector.

This narrative subverts the conventional notion of a snake as merely venomous and introduces a broader African interpretation that understands the serpent as a friend and a member of a dynamic

ecology. What we have here is a critical inversion of the symbolic value associated with the snake in European or Judo-Christian thought in which the snake is seen as venomous or treacherous respectively. Instead what is captured is a complex understanding of personhood which transcends the limited understanding of Ubuntu as a relationship between people, but rather points to the fact that people derive their sense of self and community not only out of natural, individual or material qualities but out of deep bonds that connect them with other human beings and the environment (especially land, animals and plants). Self and the world are intrinsically tied in an intricate network of reciprocal relations and obligations that create the desired moral order and equilibrium between environment, the individual, the family and society (or the extended family which, ultimately, includes all humanity). Our personhood therefore is dependent not only on our relations to other persons but to the entities that sustain us and indeed make us. We are as much *Majola* as we are the King and that is what Ubuntu teaches us, and through Jordan we can appreciate the complexity of a concept that is ever caught between opening a pathway to a more humane world and being usurped for commercial gain and political rhetoric.

The second thing that Jordan draws our attention to is that although the young Prince returns to assume his place in a society which expects him to exercise his responsibilities in a context over-determined by specific socially derived obligations, the young King has changed. He is now a new product of a modernist project that he has been hailed into through his education. His newly acquired sense of agency is at odds with the agency rooted in the connectedness of people and interdependence that has given him his current status and authority. He can accept the dying-wish of his father that he returns to reclaim his crown, but he cannot accept his wish that "*he should marry the princess royal of the Bhaca!*" (141). He wants to exercise individual autonomy and to shape the direction his community must move, but they will not allow him to forge a new idea of personhood outside the norms established by the community.

One of the first tensions within the text, especially when the young chief has taken up the leadership of his people, is how to reconcile a modernist idea of progress and development and the beliefs of his people that he has reduced to superstition and witchcraft. This is reflected in King Zwelinzima's insistence, for

example, that goats of his people should be destroyed so that the diviners may be thrown out of work. This would seem to be the beginning of alienation of the King from his people. He is impatient with the ways of his people yet he has readily accepted authority vested in him by tradition which he seeks to dismantle in haste. Sulenkama, the Great Chief of the House of Majola, cautions him to tread carefully: "We have to realize that the belief in witchcraft and diviners is very deeply rooted in the minds of our people. Now while we want to abolish these beliefs, we must on no account hurry the people. It's sympathy they need. And if you don't give them sympathy, it's sure to lead to a serious clash" (177-8). Similarly, the wife, while enjoying her role as the Queen Mother, insists on accompanying her husband to the Bhunga (royal assembly) in spite of the open disapproval of her husband's people. In spite of the protestations from the people in the royal palace, she kills *nkwakhwa*, the royal snake never referred to by name, but as '*Majola'*. In the face of it, she is unrepentant and abrupt.

It is quite clear, although not put in so many ways, that Jordan neither fully approves of the traditional norms rooted in communal interdependence nor a reckless embrace of individualism which seeks to assert autonomy without due respect to those rituals and symbolic structures that continue to inform the lives of so many people.

But Jordan is also sceptical of total subservience to communitarian ethos or is it communal tyranny? The community's grammar of speaking is framed in nationalistic language, often evoking purity of the community and harking back to a past that is elusive; and a language of exclusivity rather than inclusivity (best captured in the rupture and dissent that ensues during the meeting called to discuss the action of the mother queen). We witness self-interest couched in the lexicon of communal interest (e.g. Dingidawo's selfish motives and scheming against his nephew), and indeed unyielding patriarchal practices which continue to hold sway under the guise of respect for tradition and some unchanging rituals of staging power and authority.

Communal tyranny, as opposed to communal consensus that often defined communal deliberation, now threatens and destroys the genuine human desire of the young Prince—Zwelinzima—to exercise a voluntary choice to marry a woman that he desires regardless of her station. In killing the royal snake, the Queen Mother was possibly acting from a mother's natural instinct to protect her

baby. A self-interested and blind response, based purely on communal history and ritual, condemns her without any attempt to understand the motive behind her actions. She is driven to a state of schizophrenia and commits suicide with the crown prince. The tyranny of communal ethos also drives the King to a state of delirium and he too commits suicide. Is 'the wrath of the ancestors' against those who deviate from the ways of the community or is Jordan pointing to a fundamental irony in the title, which is that any form of dogma, whether philosophical or political, is disastrous and detrimental to a humane idea of personhood or even the inevitability of confronting our interconnectedness? The King and his people are one but his change results in a new but difficult relationship and conversation between the King and his subjects—a conversation they are all trying to find the grammar with which to articulate but each fail in their respective ways to develop.

Evidently, pragmatic approach to understanding personhood should be a process of deliberate and careful negotiation between those values rooted in communal ethos and those that seek to reach out for individuality and associated elements of freedom to choose and act as free agents of change. Either of the extremes is likely to lead to disequilibrium and total disregard for what is human. For those who would disregard the everyday practices of the people, the letter from Nomvuyo to his friends is a relevant pointer to the pragmatism advanced in the text:

> My dear friends, the work you still have to do among the Mpondomise is enormous. Looking back on what I saw during my stay with you, I should advise you not to be too hasty in your leadership. If you try to drag them too fast, they will drop, exhausted by the wayside and you yourselves will collapse before you reach the place where you want to take them. Gallop steadily, for the land is steep! (1980, 177)

Alternatively, Chief Sulenkama reminds the Prince:

> Now I'm telling you all this because I want to impress the fact upon you that our people still believe implicitly in these things. So whoever is going to lead them must learn to hasten slowly in these matters. (179 – 180)

Jongilanga calls for moderation before his death and disavows the politics of exclusivity that he had preached (241 -243). Like wisdom, personhood is forged through experience and contact with the greater community and its many resources located both in the past and in the present. It is constantly negotiated through understanding and sympathy—through self and community. In framing personhood in communitarian terms, especially in the context of postcolonial politics, it creates the space for subverting extreme forms of individualism. If personhood is linked to independence of the self, it allows for constant questioning of dogma such as the type that leaves the Mapondomise people paralysed at the end of the novel, but sees them reaching out for a pragmatic way forward, which is to register our complex entanglement as human beings. I think this is what Gykye (1995) had in mind when he talked about "moderate communitarianism" as a dialectical view of individualism and communitarianism. I think too that it is this awareness of our entanglement as people across racial, ethnic, gender and class divide that the idea of Ubuntu implies in a range of African communities and specifically in a complex post-colonial/post-apartheid context that South Africa is. It is also about reconsidering values according to their time-bound usefulness and demonstrating that African value systems such as Ubuntu can be reworked as they enter into conversation with other forms of knowledge, whether these are imported or locally generated. The possibility of dialogue between Ubuntu and Chriastian values that we refer to in this volume and that African thinkers like the Arch-Bishop Desmond Tutu (2011) have written about, is a good example. Ubuntu, as some of the papers in this volume also intimate, will have to come to terms as a philosophy and moral value system with an ever changing society challenged by metamorphosing and ever adapting systems of oppression on the African continent and beyond.

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