Chapter Six: Dreams, Documents and Passports to Heaven: African Christian Interpretations of The Pilgrim’s Progress

In a recent discussion of The Pilgrim’s Progress in The New York Times, a columnist referred to the book as an ancestor of the B-movie. Anyone chancing upon the Ndebele translation of the story would have to agree. Turning to the final pages, one encounters a lurid illustration entitled “Ugulahlwa gu ka Naziyo” (The Undoing of Ignorance). In the foreground, two white angels have pitched the black body of Ignorance head first into the flames of hell. An owl (the bird of witchcraft) hovers above the smoke while a snake rears its head through the flames, ready to strike the unfortunate Ignorance. In the background, the protagonist, Christian, and his companion, Hopeful, arrive at the Gates of Heaven, after their arduous pilgrimage from the City of Destruction. In the illustration, they hand their documents over for inspection to two sentry angels.

This particular edition of The Pilgrim’s Progress first appeared in 1902 and was to be one of 80 translations undertaken by Protestant missions across the continent. As a classic of evangelical Protestantism, and as a ‘shadow’ Bible, the book was intensively used for proselytisation both amongst the ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ heathen. The text itself was produced in the wake of the English Revolution and its earliest migrations formed part of the Dissenting diaspora. As those persecuted by the Restoration authorities fled to Europe, North America and the Anglophone Caribbean, they took their beloved book with them. From these new destinations, it spread even further. Across the Atlantic, for example, the book rapidly seeped into the slave Christianities of the North American seaboard and the Caribbean.

Its next major international boost came courtesy of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestant missions. The Pilgrim’s Progress had become one of the seminal texts of the Evangelical Revival and the mission movement that it spawned was keen to propagate Bunyan’s text wherever it went. The Protestant mission movement drew its personnel from across the North Atlantic, and missionaries consequently came from different denominational, linguistic and national traditions. When entering the mission field, they brought very different ‘Bunyans’ with them and put very different ‘Bunyans’ on the table to translate.

Back in England, this apparently universal dissemination of Bunyan was used by Nonconformists to add value to ‘their’ most beloved author. As a writer long associated with the Nonconformist lower orders, Bunyan was seen, in official and High Church circles, as lamentably vulgar. If The Pilgrim’s Progress was indeed ‘universal’, then, in the eyes of Nonconformists, this could be used to demonstrate his importance and value and to improve his general standing. Nonconformist-aligned organisations established the idea of Bunyan’s universality as a fact and an item of common sense. The emerging discipline of English literature soon picked up this particular baton and intellectuals in this domain began to link his universality to his Englishness. From being a despised and decidedly ‘unEnglish’ writer in the eighteenth century, Bunyan, by the late nineteenth-

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1 For a detailed discussion of the processes set out in this section, see Hofmeyr (2002).
century, had become an icon of Englishness and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the ‘father’ of the English novel (partly as I’ve indicated on the back of the book’s mission imperial circulation).

By the late nineteenth-century, copious handfuls of Bunyan confetti had been sprinkled both at home and across the mission empire. In Britain, the book was not only read in every possible way (silently, devotionally, dramatically, as part of household performance, on sabbath day readings and so on); it was also orbited by a galaxy of commodities, spectacles, heritage and tourist experiences. Puzzles, playing cards, pageants, portraits and pottery all portrayed scenes from the book and from Bunyan’s increasingly biographied life. Reproductions of his realia, monuments, a refurbished tomb and museum displays put Bunyan in the public domain. Landscapes, gardens, tourists destinations, motoring and cycling routes through ‘Bunyanland’ (in his home county Bedfordshire) provided a repertoire of Bunyan experiences.

The book and its swarm of appurtenances did not only hover over Britain. As mission translations of the text increased (there were ultimately to be about 200 translations worldwide) so bits of this modular roadshow floated into the circuits of mission Imperialism. A gallimaufry of magic lantern slides, wall charts, flannelgraphs, postcards, illustrated tracts and posters wafted about the mission domain.

The one molecule of this Bunyaniana that particularly concerns us here is the ‘B-movie’ Ndebele translation. This edition was the work of David and Mary Carnegie of the London Missionary Society, based at Hope Fountain in Matabeleland in present-day Zimbabwe. It was adapted from Bishop Colenso’s 1868 Zulu translation (Zulu and Ndebele being cognate languages). The illustrations were executed by C J Montague and were probably the earliest instance in which Africans were used to depict characters in Bunyan’s story.

At first glance, the picture may appear unremarkable – just another piece of predictable mission iconography. In this colonially-conceived drama of sin and salvation, the ‘saved’ wear Western-style clothing while the feminized body of Ignorance has only a loin-cloth as covering. Spiritual authority is racialized with the angels depicted as white. Yet, when judged against most traditions of Bunyan illustration, the picture becomes more interesting. There are of course thousands of renditions of Christian and Hopeful entering heaven. The scene represents the triumphant climax of the first part of the story and in various editions, we see Christian and Hopeful making their way into paradise in every conceivable way - they fly, they walk, they fall on their knees, they are lifted up by angels. Yet, whatever their mode of transport, nowhere do we see them holding any documents. The text, by contrast, is very specific on this point. At the Gate, the two pilgrims, Christian and Hopeful, are asked for their “certificates” which had been issued to them earlier in their journey (215).3 They produce their papers, which are first taken to the King of Heaven for checking. Thereafter the pilgrims are ushered into the glistening streets of paradise. Ignorance, who arrives shortly afterwards, is not so lucky. He has no
certificate and when asked for one, he feebly “fumble[s] in his bosom…and found none” (216). The two Shining Ones direct him to a side exit plummeting straight into Hell. The narrator comments, “Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction” (217).

Evidently, to nineteenth-century European and American readers the idea of gaining entry to heaven by a piece of paper seemed far-fetched, despite the fact that this is exactly what the story shows. Yet, for some African converts, this scene was of considerable importance and in some instances made its way into dreams. Take, for example, the case of a man whom we know only as Bayolo. A resident of the Loma region of the Upper Congo, he fell ill in his middle years and ‘died’. As the funeral was about to commence, some mourners noticed that Bayolo seemed to be twitching. These movements quickened and soon Bayolo had returned to life. He reported his experiences to an amazed audience. In his trance, he had travelled to the gates of heaven. There, two men stood and asked him for his “road book”. He didn’t have one. “Return and get your road book,” they said, “confess your sins, remove your camwood powder and make yourself clean”.

After narrating his dream, Bayolo asked to be taken to the mission church which he had never entered before. There he expressed his desire to become a Christian and re-told his story to a curious crowd. He also predicted that within two to three days he would die, an event that indeed came to pass. Many hundreds, or so the mission report said, decided to join the church in the wake of these happenings.

A cognate set of concerns emerges from an early Sotho novel (Monono ke Moholi ke Mouoane – Wealth is a Haze, A Mist) (1926), by Everitt Segoete, a member of the Paris Evangelical Mission Station in present-day Lesotho. Towards the end of the narrative, the protagonist, Khitsane, like Christiana in the second part of Bunyan’s story, receives a perfumed epistle written in gold lettering, inviting him to heaven. He is instructed to present the document on arrival at the gates of Heaven. The letter is a source of great anxiety to him and he shakes and sweats at the prospect of the journey before him (186-7). A similar idea occurs in a popular Sotho song sung by migrant workers who before the collapse of the gold-mining industry earned a precarious living working several miles down South Africa’s deep-level mines.

If it were possible to write to heaven,
I would send the old folks there,
So that [if] they find Jordan flooded,
[It] is crossed by books,
…and by certificates…

The river Jordan, this poem maintains, is crossed only by books and certificates. The poet wishes he could write to heaven to pave the way for his old relatives who, lacking the necessary education, will find Jordan flooded and so, difficult to cross.

In other contexts, we encounter variations on this theme of conditional entry to heaven.
In 1938, an agent of the Africa Inland Mission probably in Western Kenya reported that Ukok, an erstwhile soldier of Satan had – like Bayolo – miraculously arisen from the dead. He testified that he had traveled to Heaven’s Gate but had been refused entry. He was instructed to return to earth and to destroy the little huts he had built for sacrifices. Once he had completed this task, he could retrace his steps to heaven and gain access.

Sundkler, who has examined African-initiated churches in southern Africa, reports several cognate prophecies concerning heaven and its stringent entry qualifications. In some of these prophecies, the injustices of South Africa are reproduced in heaven: a black messiah, for example, opens the gates for black Christian while Jesus admits whites. In another version, twelve gates of heaven are reserved for whites and only one is open to blacks. By contrast, Isaiah Shembe, founder of the Church of the Nazarites (one of South Africa’s major independent churches), reversed pre-existing inequity. As a keeper of the Gates of Heaven, he turned whites away “because they, as the rich men, have already in their lifetime received their good things, and [Shembe] opens the gate only to his faithful followers”. Sundkler reports that Nazarite adherents “who have returned from heaven” (i.e. had visions and dreams) laid great stress on finding the keys to heaven or encountering the Zulu Holder of the Keys at the Gates of Heaven.

These dreams and visions all point to a complex understanding of literacy and spiritual authority. Many of them bear some ‘family resemblance’ to the final scene of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* Part I. What might Bunyan’s book tell us about literacy and heaven?

*In keeping with the paraliterate world that Bunyan inhabited, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* depicts a social order in which documents are not an everyday occurrence. Documents appear infrequently in the text and when they do, they are foregrounded, often becoming a center of theatricalized or proscenium-like attention. Images of books, for example, appear framed (72) or in visions and dreams (80; 191). God sits on a cloud with the book of judgment open on his lap (80). Every now and then, the pilgrim protagonists encounter some public signage, often associated with a monument or statue of some kind (158; 169; 176). They stop and observe these ‘bill boards’ as if they were observing some kind of pageant. Elsewhere in the story, literate objects become the fulcrum of important scenes. Christian, in the famous opening scene, carries a Bible. He also receives a parchment roll from Evangelist bearing the inscription “Fly from the Wrath to Come” (53). These two documents serve to ‘kick start’ the plot. At the cross - another fulcrum in the story – Christian loses his burden. Three “shining ones” appear to him and hand him a “roll” which he must keep in order to gain entrance to heaven (82). As we’ve already seen, Christiana, in the opening scenes of Part II, is first summoned to heaven by a letter from God, perfumed with the best scent and written in gold (237). When she reaches Beulah Land, the heavenly waiting room, she and her co-pilgrims each receive a letter from the heavenly mailman calling them to their rest (377-84).

Yet, despite the rapt attention which they merit, documents, in this paraliterate environment, are regarded with some skepticism. Written messages by themselves are slightly suspect and are always ‘reinforced’ by some additional and more trustworthy
form of communication. Christiana, for example, receives the message to join her husband in heaven both through a dream and through a letter (256). When she and her co-pilgrims receive their summons to cross the River of Death, each letter is accompanied by a “sure token” (377) that vouches for the messenger’s - and presumably the message’s - veracity. When Christian is presented with his roll, it is paralleled by a mark on his forehead as the sign of his election (82). These instances all point to the fact that written documents by themselves are not entirely reliable for conveying information. To have authority, they must still be embedded in older and more trusted repertoires of communication.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, then, letters and documents are ambiguous – they are held in awe, yet are not entirely trusted. Another ambiguity is that they can entertain and please but can equally cause considerable anxiety. In terms of pleasure, they are not only physically alluring with their scent and golden letters, they also portend great heavenly bliss. Equally, they are tokens of spiritual power. In some cases, letters come directly from God and are potent messages from him. Documents also protect their bearers and literally cause heavenly doors to open for them. Those without documents enjoy no such protection or power. Indeed at least one illiterate character, Hopeful, carries a book with him (193), not because he can read its content but because he believes it to be a talisman of authority. The book also allows him to participate indirectly in a documentary culture and to utilize its props in his performances of piety. Elsewhere in the text, documents provide other forms of pleasure. Christian, for example, carries a roll with him and at times reads from it, an activity that consoles and comforts him. For some of the male characters, books are a necessary pre-condition for spiritual authority and confer interpretive power on those who can use them.

But, pieces of paper can also cause worry and anxiety. Christian, for example, at the opening of the story is reading a book. It brings him little succor and makes the burden on his back seem heavier than before. Evangelist provides him with a parchment containing onerous advice – “Fly from the wrath come”. The advice scares and confuses Christian. “Whither shall I fly?”, he asks anxiously. At another point in the journey, Christian, exhausted from struggling up Hill Difficulty, takes a short nap in an arbor and loses his roll. Unaware of his oversight, he proceeds on his journey. When he realizes he has mislaid the precious piece of paper, he is overcome with “great distress” (88). He feels he has lost his “pass into the Celestial City” (88). He turns back, weeping, sighing and chiding himself for his foolishness: “O wretched man that I am, that I should sleep in the day time!” (88).

Another site of trauma is Vanity Fair. Here in the bawdy hubbub of the market place, documents such as titles to houses, lands, places, and preferments change hands (138-9). Christian and his companion, Faithful, boycott the merchants who abuse and torment them. They are tried for disturbing the peace and for holding seditious opinions. Faithful is found guilty and burned at the stake. Part of the legal process entails documentary paraphernalia, like the indictment sheet and presumably the parchment from which the sentence is read (141). These become ominous props in the drama of the court. This power-laden use of documents is echoed at other points, as we’ve seen, in the images of
God as a judge perusing the great book of life in which the saved and the damned are recorded (80, 191). Elsewhere in the text volumes of bureaucratic records likewise chronicle the names of sinners and saved (376). Such images equate the grim inevitability of judgment with the relentless record-keeping that bureaucracy enables. Part of God’s power evidently resides in his efficient paper-work and administration. Through these images, documents are implicated in the mechanics of ruling and having to carry them can betoken powerlessness. In keeping with Elizabethan vagrancy laws, Christian, a masterless man, has to carry a “pass” (88) to indicate that he has permission to be traveling.

Another source of anxiety is illiteracy and at least one character, Hopeful cannot read (158). In some views, Christian is also of uncertain literacy, although, in comparison to Hopeful he is described as “learned” (158). At the opening of the story he cannot fully understand the Bible. Reading, too, is by no means straightforward. At one point, for example, Christian and Hopeful encounter “an old monument” resembling a woman transformed into the shape of a pillar (158). Hopeful spots an inscription “in an unusual hand” above the statue and he asks Christian to read it for him. Christian does a “little laying of letters together” and works out that the inscription reads “Remember Lot’s Wife”. The process of first noticing and then decoding these three words takes some time. Reading is by no means effortless and costs intense and cumbersome effort, rather as Bunyan and his class must have found it – “a physical pilgrimage in print”; “a slow and persistent toiling towards meaning” as one Bunyan critic describes it.

Documents can also bring trouble. Christian and Hopeful, for example, land themselves in hot water over a note that is given to them by the shepherds in the Delectable Mountains. The note furnishes directions for their journey, but they, fatefully, forget to read it. As a result, they are waylaid by Flatterer and enticed into a net where they become ensnared. “A Shining One” releases them and whips them for their forgetfulness (185).

Documents are paradoxes. On the one hand, they are props in the theatre of ruling, policing and dragooning. On the other, they betoken enchantment and spiritual authority. These multiple functions are usefully distilled in the changing nature of Christian’s roll. He receives the roll when he encounters the cross and his burden falls from his shoulders. Three Shining Ones appear to him and kit him out with a new set of clothes and a sealed roll for him to “look on” (82). Along with his new clothes and name - he was first called Graceless (91) - it betokens a new identity. The roll also provides entertainment and enlightenment since on his journey, the roll becomes a book/Bible from which he reads, an activity that provides refreshment and delight. In this guise, as Soenser Breen has pointed out, the roll confers spiritual authority on Christian as he sharpens his interpretive abilities. (By contrast, Christiana, as Breen indicates, appears seldom to read and is relegated to the oral/aural sphere). But, at the same time, the roll carries ominous overtones. When Christian loses the roll, he refers to it as a “pass” (88). He also speaks of it as his “evidence” (both of election but also of his right to be on the road) (91). By the end of the book, the roll has become a “certificate” which is taken in to the King of Heaven who reads it first before admitting its owner. In this guise, the piece of paper
becomes a power-laden object with magical properties. This function is prefigured when Christian identifies the roll as an object which can “vanquish” his “carnal cogitations” (95). One of Christian’s traveling companions, Little Faith also carries a certificate but at times, it becomes a set of jewels (177). In both these instances, the roll functions like a charm which protects its bearer.

Characters in the story then are not always in control of their documents. Pieces of paper can prove troublesome. They change shape and form; they disappear and re-appear. They demand different types of attention, behavior and deportment. At times, they must be contemplated as objects. At times, their content must be read attentively. At times, they must be carefully carried. Documents, in other words, are dangerous and unpredictable. But, they are also priceless and precious – they are after all passports to heaven.

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In 1898, Andrew Cindi sent a pleading letter to his former principal, James Stewart. Cindi had graduated from Lovedale, a major mission institution in the Eastern Cape, but because he had been caught smoking marijuana (“I never knew it was sin… I found out afterwards that you don’t reckon it as tobacco…”), Stewart refused to release his “religious certification”… Cindi found himself nearly a thousand miles away in Mafeking and wished to join an LMS congregation. They, however, required the certificates before Cindi could be admitted as a member of the church. Cindi begged:

I ask only my Daily soul’s bread from you, which is the blood of Christ & Body.  
I ask my religious certification to be received in the congregation I am at now…  
Sir I am in great trouble of doubting my forgiveness from God the Omnipotent.17

The letter ended with a postscript that invoked Bunyan.

I can’t live without Christ. You have the Celestial City’s key.  
And please give it to me or let me in you don’t know the day I’ll be summoned at.  
Let me in let me in let me in.18

The use of Bunyan in this context is not unexpected. Lovedale Missionary Institution was a veritable Bunyan epicentre in the sub-continent and the text was intensively propagated in both English and Xhosa from classroom, church, literary society, and school play. As a Lovedale pupil, Cindi would have known the text well and in his letter, he relies in part on the story to underline his plight. Like Christian, Cindi has lost his documents and is desperate to reclaim them since they will open the Gates of Heaven. Without them, he, like Ignorance, is doomed. For Cindi, documents are absolutely essential for access to spiritual authority but they also make him demeaningly dependent on mission authority. Pieces of paper become a zone of contradiction between power and powerlessness.

This paradoxical pattern of documents was common in the lives of many nineteenth-century African Protestants who faced a paraliterate world not dissimilar to that inhabited
by Bunyan. As in Bunyan’s sphere, documents in a colonial context played a prominent role in the exercise of authority and so, could provoke considerable trepidation. In the religious domain, by contrast, they became potential ciphers of spiritual authority and pleasure.

Like many other kinds of social contradiction, this one was to become a site of painful creativity as those caught in it attempted to understand, control or imaginatively resolve its strictures. In many instances, this creativity took the form of call-dreams and visions. One characteristic motif in these “dream-geographies of heaven” is that of miraculous literacy. In these stories and dreams, believers instantaneously learn to read and write. The famous Xhosa prophet, Ntsikana, discovered hymns fully formed on the hem of his cloak or on the tailbrush of his cow. Likewise, Simon Kimbangu, the prophet who led a break away church from the Baptists in the Lower Congo in the 1920s, could ‘fetch’ hymns from the ‘other side’. Walter Matita, a prophet from Lesotho who founded the Church of Moshoeshoe learned to read and write from an angel in heaven. In 1925, Abiodun Akinsowon, a Nigerian, had a vision in which she was “transported into a celestial realm and instructed in various heavenly mysteries”. Here, she passed a “rigid spiritual examination”.

One could adduce further examples. They re-iterate a shared cluster of themes: a protagonist demonstrates his or her power through ‘fetching’ literacy and its products from a sacred realm. Literacy is defined as a type of sacred energy which is retrieved ‘whole’. In such transactions, literacy resembles electricity. It comes on stream magically, as though through a switch. The prophet’s creativity lies neither in laboriously mastering the component skills of the technology nor in the slow craft of composition. Rather it resides in the gift and ability to ‘fetch’ the power of literacy from another realm where it seems platonically already to exist.

In this inspired theory of creation, authorship does not reside with the person but comes from some higher power. The Pilgrim’s Progress itself conforms to this idea. As the foreword to a 1956 Zulu translation says, “Bunyan ‘fetched’ [the story] as if he was fetching a dream”. In this formulation, Bunyan does not ‘author’ or compose the story. Rather it comes to him whole, as a picture/vision. His creativity resides in his ability to ‘cross over’ and redeem the story from the dream world. The Pilgrim’s Progress elsewhere provides support for this view of literacy. In the text, many documents come straight from God and dreams remain a respected form of prophecy.

These narratives of miraculous literacy subordinate technologies of writing to ‘traditional’ conceptions of the sacred. In so doing, they address some of the contradictions attendant upon the documentary culture of the colonial world. Instead of being a force controlled by colonial bureaucracies and mission schools, literacy becomes a source of divine energy accessed and controlled by those with prophetic talents. The tedious and laborious necessity of learning a set of mechanical skills also disappears in these visions, where, as we’ve seen, literacy is ‘fetched’ or ‘switched on’. As a type of revelation, literacy comes directly from God and not via the compromised agency of missionaries. This ‘direct’ route bypasses the demeaning tutelage that missions often
demanded from converts wishing to rise up the mission hierarchy. At times, these apprenticeships were absurdly lengthy. Or, as one desperate group of would-be Presbyterian ministers in Nyasaland said in a famous phrase: “Let us be ordained before we die!” 25 As we’ve seen in the case of Andrew Cindi, certificates - whether for confirmation or ordination – appeared as hurdles, put in the way of those wishing to progress up the church hierarchy (or even move sideways within it).

In the dream-geographies of literacy encoded in these visions, documents exercise an ‘open-sesame’ effect. They function rather like talismans or ‘fetishes’. As much research has shown, this magical use of literacy was common in many parts of the continent. By manipulating the physical object of the document in the world, practitioners aimed to bring about transformations in other realms. In their excellent analysis of early Kongo literacy, MacGaffey and Janzen demonstrate how Protestant converts, who were generally drawn from slave or orphan backgrounds, sought to establish themselves as ritual experts in handling the documents and accoutrements of Protestantism. Through these objects, Kongo Protestants attempted to enhance their marginal positions by gaining access to spiritual power, not only by reading books but also by manipulating them as ‘fetish’ objects. This ‘African’ hermeneutic had previously traveled to other parts of the world with slaves in the diaspora who likewise saw documents as magical objects or passports to heaven.

Such ‘fetishistic’ regimes around paper objects were also practiced by evangelical Protestants who imbued documents with extraordinary power and force. In evangelical thinking, printed documents have an astonishing capacity to ‘seize’ and ‘capture’ readers and bring about radical transformations and conversions in them. Little wonder then that the Bible – and sometimes books more generally – were referred to as the ‘white man’s fetish’. Not only did this phrase elucidate the ritual and magical ways in which missionaries deployed documents. It also carries a suggestion of how missionaries and converts ‘mimic’ each other and how their practices come to resemble each other.

Beyond the mission world, colonial bureaucracies deployed documents as ritualized instruments of ruling and as a way of drawing boundaries between Africans and Europeans. Documents like passes were used to control, harass, and persecute. Official papers like tax receipts, birth certificates and exemptions of various kinds formed part of a colonial network of control. Documents were also surrogates for settler authority. Simeon Mwase, for example, reported from colonial Nyasaland that European planters used letters as their proxies in bringing charges against workers. The planter would send the ‘accused’ with a letter containing allegations against its bearer to a local magistrate. “The whiteman was not to appear in Court at all, but only by his letter. A native was to be punished by the letter’s evidence, which evidence, he could not cross-examine it”. 30

Mwase, a clerk in the colonial service, narrates this episode in a typescript which he produced while imprisoned for embezzling taxes. The book was originally entitled A Dialogue of Nyasaland Record of Past Events, Environments & the Present Outlook within the Protectorate. Its major burden is to provide a biography of John Chilembwe, leader of a brief but famous revolt against harsh plantation conditions in the Shire.
Highlands of Nyasaland. In addition, Mwase also includes chapters on colonial ‘race relations’, colonial law and penology. In setting out to tell his story, Mwase draws heavily on Bunyan and the opening and closing paragraphs of the text are taken almost word for word from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* Part I. In addition, bits and pieces in the body of the text are also reproduced from Bunyan. Like Cindi, Mwase was in all likelihood schooled by Presbyterian missionaries, this time at the famous Overtoun Training Institute in the north of Nyasaland, and here too Bunyan was taught intensively in at least two languages. So thoroughly was Mwase instructed that, while in prison, he could recall substantial chunks of the text off by heart. As a writer in prison and as an admirer of radicals in the English Revolution, it made sense to raid Bunyan, a fellow prisoner and dissident (if not a tax embezzler).

Mwase was of course not the first person to find Bunyan a useful resource when analyzing situations of social inequality. As Christopher Hill notes, Bunyan “with remorseless regularity and lethal accuracy” expressed “contempt for the aristocracy and gentry”. Despicable characters are “almost obsessively labeled as lords and ladies, gentlemen and gentlewomen”. Most worthy and admirable characters are poor and their chances of being saved are inevitably higher than those of the corrupt landed classes.

Once perceived in this way, the book offered many opportunities for allegorical shifts and reinterpretations. The multi-dimensional portrayal of documents in the text offered instructive parallels with the experience of nineteenth-century African Protestants in the domain of literacy. Part of Bunyan’s depiction of documents captures their magical dimensions as charms, talismans, “fetishes” and passports to heaven. The form of the book itself as a vision ‘fetched’ from a dream reproduced in some respects ideas about miraculous literacy. Bunyan’s book also held advice for those in the mission world seeking to understand the vexed links between literacy and religious power. With regard to the realms of colonial power, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* describes a familiar world where documents become instruments of ruling, policing, controlling and punishing. Importantly, Bunyan maps these ideas of documents as agents of oppression onto a Calvinist doctrine of election. Just as the doctrine of the elect includes some and excludes others, so too can documents enable access or prohibit it. Christian’s roll embodies this doubled idea – it is simultaneously a ‘pass’ and a ‘passport to heaven’. This idea was to prove a source of interest to a number of African writers who were to develop its implications into a critique of colonial modernity.

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As critics have noted, the Yoruba novelist, D O Fagunwa had an interest in Bunyan and drew on his work in various ways. One as yet unnoted aspect of this intertextual relationship is how Fagunwa reworks Bunyan’s images regarding the elect as a way of analysing the mechanics of colonial power. In his first novel, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale, The Brave Hunter in the Forest of Four Hundred Spirits*, (and I rely here on Karin Barber’s account of the story), some traveling hunters arrive at a mysterious city. A notice outside indicates that no-one who has mistreated a bird may enter. The hunters
(who have all obviously slain birds in their time) must of necessity ignore the sign if they are to pass through the city. As they enter, red lights appear on the hunters’ foreheads and they are escorted away by the bird police. As Barber notes, the hunters encounter a system of “mysterious efficiency”37 which parallels the experience of many Yoruba in colonial cities. In these spaces, it is almost impossible not to transgress some regulation either unknowingly or by force of necessity. To elucidate this world of arbitrary justice, Fagunwa borrows a Bunyanesque dimension. The red lights on the travelers’ foreheads recall the marks which are placed on the forehead of Christian and the other pilgrims as a sign of their election. Why they should receive the mark and not others is as mysterious as the internal workings of the colonial order.

A close follower of Fagunwa was Amos Tutuola who likewise explores the ambiguous and contradictory world of colonial modernity. What particularly fascinated Tutuola in his first novel (The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts)38 were the internal workings of the colonial bureaucracy, something that as a clerk he had been able to observe at first hand. The novel is an episodic adventure story in which the hero, a hunter, travels from village to village in the spirit-world, having hairbreadth escapes along the way. Part of his journey takes him to Heaven and Hell and after years of wandering in the spirit wilderness, he finally returns home.

Some of the most well-developed sections of the novel relate to Hell which, on close examination, resembles a mini-colonial state. It is headed up by the Devil who oversees a complex bureaucratic hierarchy with ambassadors, labor commissioners, exchange managers, and clerks. Hell also has various government divisions like an engineering section, a fire department, and a standing army. Its space is subject to urban planning principles and has street names and numbered addresses while its time is governed by industrial rhythms and disciplines with work ending at 4.30 sharp in the afternoon. The denizens of Hell are always busy and fall into three camps – workers, clerks and managers. A large contingent of workers supply and stoke the fires of hell while also removing the ash. The clerks endlessly process and file records of those currently in Hell or those who will be coming there after their deaths. (Heaven, it turns out has a similar bureaucracy which keeps records of its present and future citizens.) A small group of managers oversee the clerks’ and manual laborers’ work.

In this vision of Hell, Tutuola offers us a comically Weberian view of the administrative workings of bureaucracy. The central tasks of the bureau grind on methodically and impersonally. Clerks mindlessly and unquestioningly carry out instructions no matter how absurd. As with all bureaucracies, entry is contingent on passing examinations, a form in which knowledge, as Marx noted, is “baptized bureaucratically”.40 Those wishing to work in the bureaucracy are dispatched for expert training to the “Devil’s Training Center for Punishments” (104). Tutuola also captures what Weber called the “leveling of the governed”41 and all citizens are represented by, and so, equally reduced to, the pieces of paper that comprise their records. In this social order, people quite literally become objects of administration and forms upon which modern power may be written.

Tutuola’s vision of the colonial bureaucracy where are directed to Heaven and some to
Hell is close to Fagunwa’s in that both compare the doctrine of the elect to the workings of the colonial state. The mechanisms of both are mysterious and arbitrary and the logic of punishment and reward in both institutions is opaque. It is a view of colonial modernity as a cross between Calvinism and a lottery. In most instances, its bureaucracies deliver disappointment and terror. In a few rare instances, it delivers redemption and public service.

However, Tutuola does not simply reproduce Fagunwa’s schema. He also adds his own very particular dimensions to an understanding of the colonial bureaucracy. Unsurprisingly for someone who worked in such a system, Tutuola’s distinctive emphasis concerns an analysis of bureaucratic documentation as a critical modality of power. As others have argued, bureaucracies through written documentation play a key role in creating, regulating and policing identities such as voter, tax payer, marriage partner, criminal and so on. Likewise, in Tutuola’s novel, the chief business of the Devil’s office is to receive and preserve the records of those identified as sinners. Once such an identity has been written into one’s records (issued originally in heaven by angels as they shape people from clay), there is no escaping one’s fate.

In this question of one’s long-term destiny, Tutuola sees document- and record-keeping as a decisive factor in determining social outcomes. Yet, at the heart of this system is a mystery because in the novel, no-one knows exactly where or how the verdict on whether one is to be saved or damned is made. We also do not know how this information comes to be entered on the documents, or how the documents arrive at their destination. We know the documents are issued in heaven when a person is created. The Devil tells us that one’s behavior does play some role in the verdict that is entered on one’s records. But over and above this information, we know nothing about the heart of a system which determines everyone’s fate. At its center, then, lies a mystery.

As much political theory has taught us, state power and bureaucracy make itself mysterious in order to mask their core extractive functions. In Marx’s words, “The general spirit of the bureaucracy is the secret, the mystery, preserved within itself by the hierarchy and against the outside world….” Governing and administration, for him, are “mysteries, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste, state parasites, richly paid sycophants…absorbing the intelligences of the masses….”

Such an insight regarding the exploitative nature of bureaucracy was, of course, not difficult for an African colonial subject, like Tutuola, to arrive at. More interesting, perhaps, are the terms in which Tutuola chooses to portray and hence implicitly theorize the manifestations of that abstract and half-obscured power. If modern power can no longer be embodied in a person, but is rather a ‘thing’ like money, or an apparatus, then the question of how to portray it becomes of more than passing interest. Tutuola’s choice is an idiosyncratic but instructive one – for him, the ‘secret’ workings of the colonial bureaucracy are best figured by means of the postal service.

The novel is consequently dominated by the postal system. Heaven, hell, the various spirit-villages through which the protagonists pass, even author and reader are linked by a
gargantuan postal network. Indeed, Tutuola urges readers to send letters, both to himself and the Devil. The instructions for sending letters to Hell – to enquire if one’s name appears in their records – are elaborate.

The Devil suggested that the person should use two envelopes. He or she should write his or her name on the back of one of the two envelopes, and the correct postage stamp should be affixed to it. After that, the second envelope should be addressed as follows:

To His Majesty the King of Hell  
17896 Woe Lane  
5th Town of the Ghosts  
Bush of the Ghosts  
HELL

After addressing the second envelope, the person should put his or her letter inside it, gum it well, and post it to hell. But the person should bear in mind that his or her original record would not be sent but only a copy of it. To make things easy and fast, a postal order or money order for five shillings should be sent with the letter to the “Wild Hunter” who would help the person. (106)

Letters and telegrams travel back and forth in the novel, traversing both ‘real’ and mythical spaces, but wherever they go, they are subordinated to the workings of a sprawling but relentless postal system. Also traveling back and forth in this space of administrative rationality are all the records of humankind which must make their way from heaven where people are created, to earth where a decision must be made on whether each person is saved or damned and then, back again either to heaven or hell depending on the decision. As we’ve seen, these pieces of paper are perfect ciphers for the abstracted individuality of the modern subject. In this modular version of citizenship, each person becomes an identical template upon which modern power may be inscribed.

Tutuola’s reliance, then, on the metaphor of a postal service is prescient. In his comparison, the mysterious heart of bureaucracy and hence the nature of power are figured as a postal network in which modern subjects, like mini-billboards inscribed with information which makes them legible to the bureaucracy, circulate in the communication arteries of the state. In this scenario, bureaucratic power and the means of communication are the same thing, a combination, which as Weber pointed out, makes bureaucratic power so tenacious and difficult to unseat.[5]

However, Tutuola is no Orwell and one must stress that the text is essentially comic. Consequently in several corners of the novel, he consciously deflates the image of a pervasive colonial bureaucracy. Records, for example, sometimes do not arrive or they are delivered too early or too late. Characters turn up at the gates of heaven and are told they’ve died prematurely and must mark time in spirit-land before they can finally enter heaven (68). The Devil, disregarding modern rational employment practices, hires his cousin (97). In keeping with this comic impulse, the novel also suggests that the ‘secret’
of bureaucracy is ultimately banal – it involves keeping things in motion, and papers in circulation.

Yet, what does this all have to do with Bunyan? This and other novels by Tutuola are, of course, noted for their use of episodes from The Pilgrim’s Progress. His interest in the postal system is a further, and as yet unnoticed, instance of his use of Bunyan – the idea of a postal network which straddles heaven and earth derives from the final scenes of the second part of the story. But does this matter in any way? Is it significant or merely incidental? Does Bunyan play any part in Tutuola’s vision of bureaucracy? For Weber, of course, there is a fairly direct line between Bunyan and bureaucratic rationality. In very brief and crude terms, Weber’s line of argument may be put as follows: Bunyan is a Puritan and a Calvinist who subscribes to doctrines of inner asceticism and predestination. As a group, these Calvinist Puritans suffer from ‘salvation anxiety’ because they cannot be certain that they are saved. The psychological pressures of this condition promote forms of methodical and disciplined behavior by which they manifest outer signs of their election even if doubting it internally. This mindset, in turn, enables behaviors which are favorable to the economic rationality of capitalism and in this context, structures of bureaucratic rationality can emerge.

Tutuola also draws a link between Bunyan and bureaucratic rationality but his argument, which I extrapolate from the novel, takes a different route. In this scenario, the novel acknowledges the doctrine of election and its conditional terms of entry to heaven, both generally in the picture of heaven and hell that it paints but also in specific episodes where, for example, one character at the gates of heaven is asked to produce her “certificate” to gain entry (68). Yet, for Tutuola, this situation of limited access does not produce ‘salvation anxiety’ in which those who doubt their election try and modify their behavior. Indeed, when three hunters learn that their records are in Hell and that they are damned, they weep and are deeply upset but accept the situation as one that cannot be changed by themselves or anyone else. If characters do manifest anxiety, it is more around where their documents are located, than about trying to manifest external behavior of some desired inner state. In short, they suffer from ‘documentary anxiety’, rather than ‘salvation anxiety’. In terms of the complex meanings attached to documents and documentation in the novel, this anxiety, then, carries a broad field of meaning. In part, it is a concern about whether one’s documents are in the right place and whether they will make it through the post. In part, it is a broader anxiety about living in a system where decisions that affect your fate can be made without your knowledge and can then be entered in a bureaucratic system that will dog your future forever. It is also a feeling of unease about the new ‘modular’ forms of modernity. It is, in short, a set of anxieties about interacting with, and trying to understand the internal workings of, the institutions of the colonial state.

In building up a portrayal of documents which encompasses these levels of meaning, Tutuola must have found The Pilgrim’s Progress a suggestive source. Bunyan’s text represents documents as a source of pleasure and anxiety; magical enchantment and terror. Most critics would probably gloss the trepidation part this equation as a form of salvation anxiety. However, as the text itself makes clear, this ‘salvation anxiety’ is also
a ‘documentary anxiety’ – the piece of paper to enter heaven is both a certificate of election and a pass. Coming at Bunyan via Tutuola, we can gloss this documentary anxiety as apprehension about the forces and pressures of modernity that manifest themselves in bureaucratic apparatuses as well as the forms of identity that such structures engender. Such a claim may seem to fly in the face of much Bunyan scholarship which construes the novel as a key document of early modernity and a story about the forms of subjectivity that this requires. However, other strains of scholarship have stressed the complex interaction of ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ forms of understanding in Bunyan. Critics interested in pursuing such lines of enquiry would to well to turn to Tutuola (and the African interpretations of Bunyan on which he draws) for a particularly illuminating reading of a dimension of this problem, namely literacy, which has thus far largely escaped the attention of Bunyan scholarship. From this vantage point, Bunyan may look far less modern than we suppose.

3 John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress Part I & II (London: Penguin, 1987). All subsequent references to the story are drawn from this edition and are cited in the text.
4 Anon, “Remarkable Story of Bayolo, Loma” in Regions Beyond, 1927-31, 26. (The dating of this journal is not clear but year is probably 1928).
5 Everitt Segoete, Monono ke Moholi ke Mouoane (Morija: Sesuto Book Depot, 1926).
7 Mrs King, “The Narrow Way” in Young Africa, 78 (17) 1938, 11.
9 Sundkler, Bantu Prophets, 290.
11 This is a well-documented feature of paraliterate social orders. See, for example, M T Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
13 This view is expressed in the commentary on Bunyan in the Elstow Abbey Church in Bedford, England.
14 Hancock, “Bunyan as Reader”, 69.
15 Soenser Breen, “Christiana’s Rudeness”.
17 De Kock, Civilising, 95-6.
18 De Kock, Civilising, 96.
19 Sundkler, Bantu Prophets, 293.
23 Nelson Osamu Hayashida, Dreams in the African Church: The Significance of Dreams and Visions among Zambian Baptists (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 100.
24 B Johanson, “Amazwi Esingeniso” [Introduction], Uhambo Lwesihambi, [The Pilgrim’s Progress Part I], (tr) B Johanson (Sweetwaters:Union Bible Institute, 1956), 4. Thanks to Bheki Peterson for translating this foreword.
25 T Jack Thompson, Christianity in Northern Malawi: Donald Fraser’s Missionary Methods and Ngoni Culture (Leiden: E J Brill, 1995), 166.
29 Bela Vassady, The Role of the Black West Indian Missionary in West Africa, 1840-1890, D Phil, Temple University, 121.
31 Mwase, Strike, 1, 129.
32 Mwase, Strike, 101.
33 For a biographical sketch of Mwase see, Robert Rotberg, “Introduction” to Mwase, Strike.
34 Hill, A Tinker, 221, 225.
37 Barber, “Audiences”, 3.
42 Sayer, Capitalism, 138.
43 Quoted in Sayer, Capitalism, 78-9.
44 Quoted in Sayer, Capitalism, 76.
45 Sayer, Capitalism, 145.