

K A Busia on ethnicity, religion and nationality

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Introduction

Kofi Abrefa Busia, born in 1913, is a significant Ghanaian who may not be very familiar to some, though his contributions are indeed noteworthy. His life and scholarship reveal some interesting points for us about Christian faith, culture, ethnicity, nationalism and politics.

Busia was a Ghanaian statesman, an outstanding scholar, and a committed Christian. He is remembered primarily for his contributions as an eminent sociologist; indeed, his doctoral dissertation of 1951, entitled *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* remains an important reference work. Politically, he was the leader of the parliamentary opposition against Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana from 1956–1959; and from 1969–1972 he served as the Prime Minister of the Second Republic of Ghana.

Busia is an interesting figure for us to look at for a number of reasons. Considering his context of first colonial and then newly independent Ghana, we find ourselves in the midst of a period in which diverse people were brought together and were wrestling with the establishment of a new national identity, grappling with issues of nationhood, as well as historical, ethnic, and religious identities. Kwame Nkrumah is of course the figure that stands out very clearly from that period, though in fact he and Busia were peers, born within a few years of each other. However, as we will see, Busia took quite a different approach to Nkrumah. Nkrumah is remembered for trying to establish this unified new country, arguing for an ‘African personality’ and building this new nation from a kind of vision of the “glorious past” – going so far as to rename the Gold Coast “Ghana” for the ancient empire of Ghana, located within parts of present-day Mauritania and Mali; a new name for a new nation and a new identity, as it were. Busia, on the other hand, was concerned with the more recent past, and specifically his own Ashanti tribe, looking at traditional systems of kinship and government for guidance in areas of ethics and democracy in the development of this new country.

It has been said that whereas Nkrumah gave voice to many unrepresented groups in colonial society, Busia represented the ‘old guard and also appealed to Ashanti

nationalism.’¹

When considering this period of Ghanaian history, with the transition from British colonial rule to Ghana’s independence in 1957, Busia’s contributions to the development of a national identity should not be overlooked. He combined scholarship, politics and Christian faith in unique ways at a time when this newly independent country was struggling to define its national identity. Of additional interest, Busia was in many ways a product of Methodist mission endeavours in Ghana, and we will therefore consider the role of Methodist missionaries in his education and upbringing.

Busia: Biographical Background and Methodist Connections

Let us turn first to a biographical background. Busia was born in 1913 in Wenchi in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana into a branch of the Ashanti royal family, the eldest of thirteen children. As Busia was expected to succeed his uncle as chief, or Omanhene, of Wenchi, it was not planned that he would attend school. However, the story goes that as a toddler, Busia was cared for at the local school by a schoolteacher’s wife while his parents worked in their fields, and she noticed that he was in fact following the lessons and learning more rapidly than the older, registered students. Therefore, because of his clearly demonstrated abilities at such a young age, the chief was persuaded to allow him to enrol in the local Methodist school.²

When Busia was eight years old, Methodist missionary The Reverend William Whittle and his wife Alice, then stationed in Wenchi, noticed Busia’s aptitude in school and requested that he live with them in order that he might become more proficient in English and have the opportunity to continue with his studies. His family notes that ‘although treated more like a son, Busia became their houseboy, working hard in order to further his education.’³ When the Whittles were sent to

¹ Brian Schimmer, ‘Political Life’, *Political History* [of Ghana], n.d, <http://www.modernghana.com/GhanaHome/ghana/default.asp?menu_id=6&sub_menu_id=0§ion=6> [accessed 31 October 2011]

² [No Name], ‘A Short Biography of Dr. K.A. Busia’, *Photo Exhibit of Dr. K.A. Busia*. Information compiled and displayed in conjunction with a photo exhibition provided by the Busia Foundation International, displayed from 7–11 April 2008 as a courtesy of the Alexander Library in association with the 9 April 2008 documentary film screening of ‘The Prof: A Man Remembered, The Life, Vision, and Legacy of Dr. K. A. Busia.’ This event was sponsored by the Center for African Studies, Department of Africana Studies, Academic and Public Partnerships in the Arts and Humanities, Alexander Library and Busia Foundation International. One page document only; no date of publication. <http://ruafrica.rutgers.edu/events/media/0708_media/intro_busia.pdf> [accessed 31 October 2011]

³ Ibid.

Kumasi about a year later, Busia moved with them.

In rather hagiographical terms, Busia's family recounts some of his early honours and accomplishments as a child living in Kumasi in the early 1920s:

At age nine [...] Busia was chosen to hand-over a golden trowel to his Excellency, Sir Gordon Guggisberg, Governor and Commander-in-chief of the Gold Coast Colony, and also [to] make a speech at the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone for Wesley College. Speaking on the public platform, Busia's brilliance, eloquence and fluency in English, such as had never been witnessed before in the Gold Coast in one so young, spread through the nation and he became famous as 'the prodigy bush boy from faraway Wenchi'.⁴

Busia experienced a number of upheavals at an early age, but his pursuit of education remained a paramount focus. After their move to Kumasi, the Whittles soon returned to England and left Busia in the care of the Rev. John Waterworth, who was shortly replaced by the Rev. and Mrs Arthur H. Mildren, who also inherited responsibility for Busia. The Mildrens, however, were not particularly interested in his academic aspirations, and he left their house in frustration, determined to find another way to continue his studies. He persevered and was finally taken in by no less than the head of the Methodist mission in the Gold Coast, the Rev. Charles Armstrong, who promptly enrolled Busia at the Wesleyan mission school in Kumasi.

On a trip to the town of Cape Coast with The Rev. Armstrong, Busia had the opportunity to visit the Methodist-run Mfantshipim Boy's School, arguably the premier school in the whole of the Gold Coast. Busia was immediately enamoured, and was determined to one day study there, though he knew his parents could not afford the high fees. An opportunity arose when, at the age of thirteen, Busia wrote the Methodist Synod scholarship examination. Not only did he qualify; he won honours for the entire Ashanti region, affording him the opportunity to pursue secondary studies at Mfantshipim, which he undertook eagerly.⁵

Busia excelled at secondary school and began looking to the future. As his family

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid.

notes, at that time he vowed to his mother that he would one day study at Oxford, which he had heard so much about from the Rev. Whittle; and he also vowed ‘to make his country a better place, not just for the fortunate, but for the poor and disenfranchised’.⁶

This bi-cultural childhood, beginning in a royal family of Ashanti and continuing on under the care of British Methodist missionaries, gave Busia a framework for understanding and analyzing aspects of both cultures, and positioned him uniquely for his role as both a sociologist and politician.

The UK and Higher Education

It was not long before Busia began fulfilling his vows. In 1931, after completing his secondary schooling, he went for teacher training at Wesley College in Kumasi and subsequently taught at Achimota College (1935), during which time he completed a BA in Medieval History from London University (via correspondence), and subsequently fulfilled his dream of studying at Oxford, where he completed a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics in record time. By 1947 he had completed his doctorate in Social Anthropology. It is worth noting that Busia was the first black African to attend and receive a degree from University College, Oxford; indeed, this was to be just the start of numerous ‘firsts’ in Busia’s career.⁷

Political Life

After his studies at Oxford he returned to the Gold Coast where he engaged both in politics and academia. He was the first African appointed as a District Commissioner under the British Colonial Service, and held this post from 1942–1949. In 1949 Busia became the first African lecturer at the University College of the Gold Coast; and by 1954, the first African professor at the University College of the Gold Coast, teaching in the department of Sociology. It does seem especially striking that we have relatively little remembrance of a man who was such a trailblazer in these areas.

Through the 1950s and 1960s Busia held a succession of political posts, including becoming the leader of what was ultimately the official opposition to Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party, and finally, the Prime Minister of Ghana.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

This came about through somewhat unlikely means.

Busia was increasingly alarmed at Nkrumah's growing radicalism, and ran for parliament as early as 1951; but he was defeated. However, the chiefs still held some measure of power in terms of nominating members to the Legislative Council, and it was through this means that in 1952, Busia was elected to the Council. This opposition had little effect until the emergence of the violent 'National Liberation Movement' in Ashanti, which was 'determined to rid the country of Nkrumah at any cost. Its emergence forced the holding of a new election in 1956. Busia was the movement's unlikely leader, unable to restrain or control it. This was the first real threat to Nkrumah, but his party still emerged victorious, as well as vengeful.'⁸

Under Nkrumah's continuing leadership subsequent to Ghana's Independence in 1957, a number of increasingly oppressive measures were put in place, including the Preventive Detention Act of 1958, under which 'it was possible to detain a person for five years (without right of appeal to the courts) for conduct prejudicial to the defence and security of the state [...]'⁹ This made any form of political opposition very risky, and in 1959 Busia fled the country feeling that his security was in jeopardy.

He returned to Ghana in 1966 after Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup, and resumed his political endeavors. By 1969 Busia won the parliamentary elections and was sworn in as Prime Minister of Ghana's second republic. However, he seems to have been a more adept professor than politician. Ultimately, he was not a particularly popular leader in large part due to his drastic economic measures, and in 1972 the army overthrew Busia's government.

Busia died of a heart attack just a few years later in 1978 at the age of 65 while in the UK.

With that brief biographical sketch in mind, I would like to look briefly at two of his works which demonstrate different aspects of the role of ethnicity within the arenas of both politics and faith. Specifically, we want to consider these works within the context of the independence period and these ongoing questions of

⁸ [No author] "Kofi Abrefa Busia." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2004. Encyclopedia.com. <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>> [accessed 8 November 2011]

⁹ Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana: 1946–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.380.

identity on political, national, and religious lines.

We will begin with his doctoral dissertation, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, and secondly we will consider a survey he conducted for the World Council of Churches on churches in Birmingham in 1965–66.

Chieftainship, Religion and Politics in Ghana

[The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti]

Busia had a unique perspective as one standing between Ashanti and British governmental systems – that is, both historically, in terms of participating in and observing the transition from colonial to independent governments; and geographically, having lived, studied, and taught in both Ghana and the United Kingdom. This broad perspective begins to emerge in his doctoral work, published first in 1951.¹⁰ In the Preface, Busia expresses his goal with the research, saying, ‘I have tried to do two things. First, to give a picture of Ashanti political institutions as they were before the British administration, and secondly, to indicate the changes that have taken place since British administration was established.’¹¹

And the work does just that. Busia begins by giving a detailed explanation and history of the role and sacral nature of the chief within traditional Ashanti society. He explains that the chief traditionally functioned as the successor to the ancestors and performed various rites for the welfare of his people, including ‘functions which may be described as administrative, executive, judicial, and military.’¹² The chief was regarded as an intermediary between the community and the ancestors, and Busia emphasizes the importance of this role for community stability.

Elsewhere, Busia reminds us that in Africa, ‘Religion and life are inseparable [...]. In many tribes, the chief was the representative of the ancestors. This enhanced his authority. [And] [h]e was respected as the one who linked not only with political institutions but with all social institutions.’¹³

¹⁰ K.A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti: A Study of the Influence of Contemporary Social Changes on Ashanti Political Institutions* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1951; 1968).

¹¹ Busia, *The Position of the Chief*, p.x.

¹² Busia, *The Position of the Chief*, p. 36

¹³ Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967), p.9.

While the British did not abolish the Ashanti system of chieftainship per se, Busia aptly demonstrates how the British policy of ‘indirect rule’ interfered with the traditional chieftainship processes. At times the British removed (‘destooled’) legitimate chiefs or installed those who were not legitimately qualified for the position, causing conflict both among chiefs and within the wider communities.¹⁴ According to Busia, ‘The British occupation implied the abolition of the military and political sovereignty of Ashanti. The first task of the new regime was to establish the *Pax Britannica* over the territory it had occupied.’¹⁵

Busia’s thorough work on chieftainship became especially significant after Ghana’s independence in 1957 as the country began the process of constructing a cohesive national identity often looking to the past for direction. With consideration to questions such as nation building, modernization, African unity, democracy, and race relations, for example, Busia contends that ‘We cannot fully appreciate the import of these issues, or understand how they appear to Africans without reference to their past, in an effort to appreciate the sentiments and mental dispositions with which [Africans] approach their own problems.’¹⁶

And with specific reference to Ghana’s past Busia notes the traditionally foundational role of religion, contending that any who consider religion to be ‘irrelevant’ or ‘out of place’ in political discussions lack ‘a proper appraisal of the problems of Africa as Africans see them.’¹⁷

Further emphasizing the role of religion, Busia contends that ultimately, ‘behind Africa’s search for modernization and for new political and social institutions lie[s] an interpretation of the universe which is intensely and pervasively religious. It influences the decisions and choices Africa is making.’¹⁸

Here we might consider Nkrumah’s famous dictum ‘Seek first the political kingdom and all these things shall be added unto you.’

In considering the historical significance of both religion and chieftainship in the newly independent Ghana, arguments were made that ‘tribalism’ was one of the

¹⁴ Busia, *The Position of the Chief*, p.102.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy*, p.16.

greatest challenges and was simply an archaic, retrogressive obstacle to be overcome on the road to democracy in Africa. Busia countered this position forcefully, stating that

Those who see [tribalism] in this way advocate its forceful suppression or disintegration; but social realities show that the system cannot be dismissed in this doctrinaire way. It is a resilient system, as those who have tried to suppress it have discovered. For the majority of African communities the kinship systems represent a secure sheet anchor in a sea of bewildering social change, and they cling to it with intense loyalty.¹⁹

An interesting case in point here is the fact that in Busia's election as Prime Minister, he won the majority of votes from among the Akan, the tribe of which Busia was a part.²⁰

Urban Churches in Britain

We have seen how Busia's position as an Akan insider sheds light particularly on the historical and ongoing aspects of leadership and power structures in Ghanaian communities, whether through the traditional roles of chiefs or in the modern context of democratic national governments.

Next we will turn our attention briefly to a study which Busia was invited to undertake specifically as a cultural outsider during his self-imposed exile in the UK (1959–1966). The project, initiated by the World Council of Churches, was entitled 'Churches in the Missionary Situation— Studies in Growth and Response' and was part of an ecumenical research project in which researchers from diverse parts of the world conducted surveys on churches outside of their home countries. Victor Hayward explains that the project was originally intended to be 'an enquiry into the life and growth of the so-called Younger Churches'²¹ by researchers from Europe and North America, but for the sake of being 'truly ecumenical' was subsequently expanded to include researchers from Asia, Africa and Latin America studying the 'Older Churches'.

It was in this capacity, then, that Busia studied churches right here in a particular

¹⁹ Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy*, p.36

²⁰ See Dennis Austin and Robin Luckham, eds., *Politicians and Soldiers in Ghana 1966–1972* (London: Frank Cass, 1975), pp.140–163.

²¹ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain: A Question of Relevance* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), p.vii.

neighbourhood in Birmingham, and his published work is entitled *Urban Churches in Britain: A Question of Relevance*.²²

The survey included 19 churches, including: Anglican, Christadelphian, Brethren, Baptist, Christian Science, Congregational, Methodist, Quaker, Salvation Army, Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Church of Christ and Jehovah's Witnesses. The churches were evaluated in a number of areas, including ministry and evangelistic outreach; worship and teaching; home and family; the Church and young people; stewardship and finances; and social service and social responsibility.

As Hayward points out in the editorial foreword, 'Busia's sociological work was done from the objective perspective of any scientist, and not from any distinctively African point of view.' However, Hayward reminds us, it is in the conclusion, wherein Busia evaluates his findings and assesses the effectiveness of these churches in various categories that 'the reader can perceive the advantage of being given the reflections of someone brought up in a different culture [...] The significance here lies in the topics which Dr. Busia selects for his observations, as well as what he has to say about them.'²³

Two areas where Busia had particularly incisive observations included evangelism and congregational fellowship. We will briefly consider his perspectives on each.

Evangelism and Outreach

With regard to evangelism, while clergy and church members alike consistently agreed in interviews, questionnaires and surveys that "the primary aim of the Church is to 'win souls for Christ'",²⁴ Busia points out that over the course of one year, between the various churches there were 123 converts recorded, of which 86 were youth who were already involved with church programs and had simply come up for confirmation, leaving only 37 new converts (or approximately 2 per each of the 19 churches surveyed). As Busia remarks, 'It is possible that there were converts about whom we received no reports; nevertheless judged from the given results, the avowedly essential task of 'winning souls' cannot be said to be conspicuously successful.'²⁵ Additionally, he notes that the churchgoing population

²² K.A. Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain: A Question of Relevance* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966).

²³ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.vii.

²⁴ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.35.

²⁵ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.111

represented no more than 8 percent of the total population, and was not a figure that appeared to be growing.²⁶

Congregational Fellowship

Secondly, in evaluating the fellowship shared and enjoyed within three particular congregations, Busia notes that while in each church there was certainly a degree of fellowship among groups of members (he observed, for example, camaraderie among members of the various departments; time spent in conversation with one another after services; efforts made to visit, comfort and encourage those in times of difficulty, etc), ultimately members had generally lost sight of the Church as ‘one body of people [...] part of the people of God, the *ecclesia* of the New Testament.’²⁷

Additionally, he observed that many of the criticisms and complaints of church members stemmed from their approach to the Church as individualistic religious consumers primarily in search of having their own needs met, ‘the worshipping being measured by its helpfulness to themselves.’²⁸ On this point, Busia remarks that a significant amount of the criticism of members regarding their churches reflected this individualistic bent, with many ‘regard[ing] the Church as an institution from which they expected or have ceased to expect to get something for their individual lives; something which will enable them almost in isolation to live as Christians.’²⁹

As Hayward stated, it is in these conclusions that we can reap the greatest benefit in having Busia as a Ghanaian observing and challenging churches in the UK, holding up a mirror to highlight areas that those present in these situations might overlook. In the spirit of benefitting from Busia’s voice, permit me to include as a quotation his conclusion to the survey:

Finally, as I reflect upon the Churches of [Birmingham], their membership so small; spreading themselves over so many fields of activity; winning so few converts; indecisive what to do to instruct and win the young; not giving unequivocal moral leadership to those who look to them for guidance on the burning issues of the day; failing to answer effectively those who even while

²⁶ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.111.

²⁷ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.120.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

they do not reject God, reject the Church and challenge her basic tenets; foot-dragging towards the unity to which they feel impelled; the strongest impression the evidence leaves on my mind is not that the Churches are irrelevant, but that they lack the boldness that is born of conviction and faith; they seem unable to take drastic steps away from the apparent security of established traditions to meet new situations; yet their proclaimed purpose is to confront all men with a God whose essential character, according to their own message, has been revealed in Christ as Love that is also invincible power. Therein lies both judgment and challenge.³⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, thinking back to Busia's childhood, we might recall that his life, at its start, appeared to have a fairly predictable trajectory; he was to be trained traditionally, not in the mission schools, destined for a position as chief. Instead, beginning with his schooling and life with Methodist missionaries, and continuing through political involvements, sociological contributions, exile, and many 'firsts', he was clearly a man prepared to take what he terms these 'drastic steps away from the apparent security of established traditions', for which we can be thankful.

Busia is not as well remembered as some of his colleagues from the same period; indeed, it is notable in itself that there is not a great deal written about him. As we have seen, his scholarly contributions are significant, and indeed, he has been referred to as 'the doyen of Ghana's intelligentsia.'³¹ His unique position as both an ethnic and cultural insider and outsider at various points give his research weight and credibility.

Summing up his accomplishments, Busia has been described as 'an astute politician, a traditionalist, a distinguished academician, and a true Christian who made the values he believed in and his personal talents reflect on the social life of the people in his country.'³²

³⁰ Busia, *Urban Churches in Britain*, p.127.

³¹ R.R. [Richard Rathbone?], review of *Africa in Search of Democracy*, by K.A. Busia, in *African Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 271 (April 1969), p.177.

³² [No Name], 'Symposium to commemorate Busia's 95th Birthday Anniversary', *The Statesman*, 14/07/2008. Quote is from Ignatius Baffour-Awuah, the Brong-Ahafo Regional Minister at the time this article was written. <http://www.thestatesmanonline.com/pages/news_detail.php?newsid=6748§ion=1> [accessed 31 October 2011]

In considering Ghana's history and the struggle to define national, cultural and religious identities, Busia's contribution should not be overlooked, and in evaluating the history and accomplishments of Methodist Missions in Ghana, he must surely stand as a success story at the very least from an educational perspective. One wonders how this story might have been different if not for that observant schoolteacher's wife, or the Rev William Whittle of many years ago.

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