The Benefits of Travel: travel writing in the Lagos newspapers 1912-1931

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In the 1920s and 30s, a new craze spread amongst Lagosian journalists, intellectuals and writers for writing about their travels far and wide across Nigeria,\(^1\) in serialised narratives published over several weeks in the Lagos newspapers. In these travel narratives, written in both Yoruba and English, we follow the writers on journeys from Lagos across Nigeria to nearby Ijebu, Ibadan and Abeokuta, to farther afield Port Harcourt, Enugu, and Aba, and all the way to the border with Cameroon. Their narratives are tales of encountering both strangeness and familiarity, meeting old friends, forging professional and social networks, eating strange foods and making sense of what it means to be a Lagosian abroad in Yorubaland and beyond.

This article traces the emergence of these travel narratives as a genre over the 1920s and 30s in the Lagos newspapers, and in particular in the bilingual Yoruba and English newspapers *Akede Eko*, *Eleti-Ofe* and *Eko Akete*. As well as looking at how the travel narratives developed amongst a small class of Lagos-based intellectuals, in the midst of an experimental Yoruba print culture, and in a climate of changing ideas about local and regional affiliations, I discuss the writers’ ideas about travelling and travel writing as beneficial. I explore their ideas about education and wisdom, the notion of vicarious travel through the printed text, and the idea of travelling as ‘civilised,’ as it was expressed in colonial Lagos at the time.

Lagosian travel writing in the early twentieth century Yoruba and English press

Colonial Lagos in the 1920s and 30s was the seat of print and intellectual culture in Nigeria. As Karin Barber has described, the 1920s saw the establishment of a flurry of new Yoruba- and English-language newspapers in Lagos.\(^2\) The newspapers were written and read by a small group of elite Lagosians and other readers scattered across southwest and eastern Nigeria,

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\(^1\) ‘Nigeria’ was formed as the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria by the British colonial regime in 1914, but did not become a fully independent state until 1960; I use ‘Nigeria’ here to refer to the colonial state after 1914, but also, for the sake of brevity, to the pre-1914 region that later became Nigeria.

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particularly in towns with a Christian or Saro influence.³ They contained a certain amount of news, such as reports on events in Lagos and on contemporary politics, but on the whole were characterised by lengthy, discursive opinion pieces and long-running arguments about the issues of the day. They were usually published and printed by an editor who wrote much of their content, but also drew on a team of regular writers and occasional contributions from readers.

In the earliest decades of the twentieth century, the worldview of the newspapers was small and insular. In 1914, the Lagos Weekly Record, one of the major English-language Lagos papers, had a circulation of just 700.⁴ The newspapers were in essence ‘neighbourhood gazettes’,⁵ reporting local news from the social elite of Lagos, a world of picnics, local politics, and ‘at homes’. At the same time, they also reported news from the coastal elites stretching across a small sliver of the West African coast, from Nigeria to the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and the Gambia; there was frequent interchange between the editors of these newspapers, who shared a common educational and religious outlook and thought of themselves as the local ‘civilised’ intellectual elite.⁶

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid change in the ways people travelled in Nigeria. In 1901, the colonial government opened 123 miles of railway track between Lagos and Ibadan, signalling the beginnings of a railway network which would eventually stretch to faraway Nguru in northern Nigeria. In 1907, there were just two cars on the streets of Lagos; by 1920, there were 600, for an estimated population of 100,000.⁷ By 1928, the railways, which had been built primarily for cargo, were handling three million passenger journeys a year.⁸

From the beginning of the twentieth century the Lagos-based newspapers had carried reports of individuals’ travels, but until the mid-1910s, these tended to be short, impersonal reports of nearby excursions by colonial officers or elite Lagosians, or else of visits by Lagosians to their hometowns. The writers wrote of social events and networks, to be broadcast and memorialised by publication for a wider Lagosian audience, sometimes even paying the newspaper editors for the privilege; the editor of the Nigerian Times notes sternly in every edition of his newspaper in 1910 that he ‘reserves the right to charge for inserting in his news columns descriptions of entertainments, concerts, ball parties, pic-nics and all other functions and enterprizes of a like character, and such other matters as do not come into the category of news’.⁹

It was within this context that the first-person travel narratives which are the focus of this article emerged in the Lagos newspapers. One of the first of these narratives was the three-part series ‘A Tour to the Hinterland’ published in the English-language Lagos Weekly Record in October-November 1912. In this series, the pseudonymous ‘Special Correspondent’ travels to Ibadan, Abeokuta, Oyo, Oṣogbo, Edé, Ileṣa and Ifẹ and remarks on life in each town, particularly its political institutions. His aim is to teach Lagosians about the hinterland towns, since, the writer argues, ‘foreign influence’ divorces ‘the native’ ‘from his own people and life and sends him out as a segregated unit whose ideas of national life is a nationality built up without a

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³ Saros were ex-slave Sierra Leoneans or their descendants who had settled in Lagos and the hinterland, many of whom were of Yoruba descent.
⁴ J. Iliffe, Africans: The History of a Continent (Cambridge, 1995), p. 231. In fact, this was not a very small readership for the time, since many newspapers had smaller readerships, but I use the figure here to illustrate the relatively small size of readerships compared to late twentieth century mass audiences.
nation’.10 This was followed by the similar ‘A trip to Northern Nigeria and Back’ by ‘our Special Correspondent’ detailing a trip to Zaria, Kano, Katsina and beyond.11

After the publication of this narrative, few similar first-person narratives were published until the growth of the Yoruba-language press in Lagos in the 1920s, when several new newspapers were launched, written mostly in Yoruba, but interspersed with occasional English-language articles. In 1923, Eko Akete published a landmark series: the five-part ‘Irin-Ajo Lati Eko Lo Si Kamerun’ (Journey from Lagos to Cameroon) by ‘Ajeji,’ a Yoruba pseudonym meaning ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’.12 Ajeji narrates his journey from Lagos as far as Victoria (now Limbe) in Cameroon, via Bonny, Port Harcourt and Calabar.

The publication of this narrative signalled the beginning of a remarkable efflorescence of first-person narrative travel writing in the Yoruba press in Lagos, particularly in Akede Eko, Eleti-Ọfẹ and Eko Akete. At least 15 travel narratives were published in the Yoruba newspapers between 1923 and 1931.13 While some of these were short reports in the older fashion, several of them were ambitious narratives published over many weeks. As well as Ajeji, two other pseudonymous authors turned their hands to travel narratives: ‘Gay,’ who published ‘Travellers’ Observations’ [sic] in Eleti-Ọfẹ in 1926,14 and ‘Ọmọ Ègbẹ’ (‘Association Member’) who wrote a Yoruba-language account of a visit by his hometown association to Ikorodu in Eko Akete in 1924.15 A further three travel writers – all prominent members of Lagos’s print and cultural elite – wrote under their own names: E.A. Akintan, founder and editor of the newspaper Eleti-Ọfẹ; Isaac Babalọla Thomas, writer for Eleti-Ọfẹ and subsequently founder and editor of the newspaper Akede Eko; and A.K. Ajiṣafẹ, author of several important works on Yoruba history, culture, and laws, and in the words of Toyin Falọla ‘arguably the most talented and prolific Yoruba author of the colonial era,’17 who wrote a narrative of a journey from Lagos to Ibadan, Ifẹ and Ileṣa while researching his histories.18

Isaac Babalọla Thomas’s travel narratives were particularly influential. Thomas was a pioneer newspaper editor in early twentieth century Lagos, an up-and-coming member of Lagos’s elite. Thomas, who had previously been a schoolteacher, rose to prominence in the 1920s first as a journalist with Eleti-Ọfẹ, then as proprietor and editor of the Yoruba-English newspaper Akede Eko, which he founded in 1928. Thomas is best known for his serialised Yoruba novel Èmí Sègílọlá,19 generally acclaimed as the first novel in Yoruba, which Thomas wrote and published in the Akede Eko from 1929-30 and later republished as a pamphlet. Èmí Sègílọlá caused a sensation, as

10 Special Correspondent, ‘A Tour to the Hinterland’, Lagos Weekly Record (October 19, 1912 – November 9 1912).
13 Not all editions of the Yoruba-language newspapers of the 1920s and 30s have been preserved in the National Archives of Nigeria in Ibadan, so there are likely to be further travel narratives I have not yet been able to track down.
14 Gay, ‘Travellers’ Observations’ [sic], Eleti-Ọfẹ (August 18 – September 1, 1926).
15 Hometown associations were organisations established by migrants from the Yoruba-speaking region and their descendants in Lagos and other large towns. As well as supporting each other in their new towns, they remained involved in the economies and politics of their ‘hometowns’, and many frequently travelled home individually and as associations, to see families, for important festivals, and to intervene in local politics. See L. Trager, Yoruba Hometowns: Community, Identity and Development in Nigeria (Boulder, 2001), and N. Sawada, ‘The educated elite and associational life in early Lagos newspapers: in search of unity for the progress of society’, PhD thesis (Univ. Birmingham, 2012).
19 ‘The life story of me, Segilola of the fascinating eyes, she who had a thousand lovers in her life’ in Barber’s translation; referred to henceforth in this article as Èmí Sègílọlá.
the readers’ letters attest, and established Thomas’ position as a writer, a publisher, a proponent of the Yoruba language, and a literary innovator.20

But the novel was not the only result of Thomas’s innovation. Back in 1926, Thomas wrote a series of columns called ‘Ero L’Ọna’ or ‘The Traveller’ for Eleti-Ọfẹ. The columns span a period of three months, and detail Thomas’ journey from Lagos to the port town of Sapele, in present-day Delta State. Thomas was travelling on business, but his columns tell more of his delight in travelling, the sights he saw and people he met on the way, the growth of print culture and the newspaper network, and his thoughts on the meaning and benefits of travelling. When Thomas left Eleti-Ọfẹ to found Akede Eko in 1928, he took the ‘Ero L’Ọna’ format with him, and published three further ‘Ero L’Ọna’ series between 1929 and 1931. Meanwhile, in both Eleti-Ọfẹ and Akede Eko other writers had begun to write travel narratives, closely following Thomas’s style. A spate of travel narratives appeared in Eleti-Ọfẹ and Akede Eko between 1926 and 1930, by E.A. Akintan, the pseudonymous ‘Gay,’ and A.K. Ajishaf, with all three authors narrating their travels around different parts of the Yoruba-speaking region.

The travel writers write about towns, or journeys between towns; there is little sense of a natural or social world beyond the town in their work. Indeed, there are very few descriptions of flora and fauna or of the landscape, as was common in contemporaneous European travel writing; instead, their narratives are narratives of intense sociability, structured around their meetings with other ‘civilised’ people. Wherever they go, the writers describe meeting friends or colleagues who show them around, usually migrant Lagosians. They build complex webs of sociability and display their social capital through constant reference to their social, business and political networks beyond Lagos, to the extent that their namedropping sometimes threatens to overwhelm the chronological progress of their narratives.

Places outside Yorubaland, and sometimes even outside Lagos, are often described as strange and exotic by these writers, and sometimes their narratives differ little in this regard from foreign travel writing of the time (I.B. Thomas calls for missionaries to come and ‘teach these naked people’ of Port Harcourt, who are like ‘wild animals’, to wear clothes, for instance).21 However, Thomas does not see the places to which he travels solely as repositories of difference; in one series, he enjoys interacting with the local people, and he learns a few phrases of their language, which he prints with explanations. Indeed, through their writing, newspaper travel writers saw themselves not only reflecting but actually shaping local ties; the writer of the Lagos Weekly Record series helped his Lagosian readers to know the hinterland, while I.B. Thomas not only textualised and made public his relationships with migrant Lagosians and locals, but also sought to help his readers imagine both the strangeness and the familiarity of eastern Nigeria for themselves, to build a written connection to the place. E.A. Akintan, meanwhile, depicts the Yoruba region as known and knowable, a very local place which his readers can easily understand.

Though the scope of their writing was what we might belatedly label as national, these travel writers were not particularly concerned with the idea of the nation; in fact, the word ‘Nigeria’ hardly ever appears in their texts.22 Rather, these writers are more interested in various and shifting translocal networks and regions in the hinterland and across the ‘civilised’ zone of the coast. The travel narratives epitomise the newspapers’ paradoxical simultaneous insularity and outwardness; they were interested in the world beyond Lagos and in expanding

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20 K. Barber, Print Culture, pp. 34-65.
22 Compare this to a later travelogue describing a journey to the UK, ‘Irin Ajo Mi Lati Eko Lọ Silu Oba’ by Taju Thompson, published in Akede Eko in 1952, in which Thompson constantly refers to himself and his companions as Nigerians, and contrasts things back home in Nigeria with what he sees in the UK, mentioning the word ‘Nigeria’ thirteen times in total.
the reach of the paper, but used a range of references and people which located both their audience and the people they represented in a 'little Lagos' abroad. If localised conceptions of readerships were expanding in this period, as Rita Nnodim has suggested with regard to Yoruba novelists and poets' conceptions of their audiences, then newspapers, travel and travel writing also played a significant role in these changing configurations, and benefited from them themselves. But the newspapers were ambivalent about their expanding scope, welcoming news that came from their 'civilised' Christian world, while fearing an influx to Lagos of people from the hinterland, imagining the hinterland instead as a region suffused with people just like them.

The travelogues flourished within a culture of intense and exciting literary experimentation in the newspapers, and the travel writers were part of a group of writers and intellectuals who established much of Lagos's early print and literary culture. Alongside local news, the newspapers printed a variety of literary texts, ranging from oríkì to biography, history to poetry and plays. The first Yoruba novels or novelettes, one by E. A. Akintan, editor of the newspaper Eleti-Ọfe, and the other I.B. Thomas's Ìtàn Èmi Sègílọlá, were serialised in the newspapers in 1928 and 1929 respectively. The existence of the travel narratives demonstrates that writers were experimenting with narrative before the emergence of more famous fictional texts such as Ìtàn Èmi Sègílọlá. The later travel writing series competed for space with Itàn Èmi Sègílọlá; Thomas's 1929 'Ero L'Oña' stops abruptly before its promised ending, and is followed very soon after by Itàn Èmi Sègílọlá. Though Thomas mentions readers' requests for further travel writing series, no such readers' letters were actually published, unlike Ìtàn Èmi Sègílọlá, which provoked a flurry of readers' comments. While this may have been a result of Thomas' growing skill in self-promotion, it seems also likely that the travel series were not as successful as Ìtàn Èmi Sègílọlá, hence the entrepreneurial Thomas's switch to experiment with a new genre. So, the travel narratives emerged at a time when newspaper writers, editors and proprietors were playing with the possibilities that print offered in terms of audience, genre and style.

The travel writing context in Lagos

But why did the writers light upon travel writing in their literary experiments? Travel writing had some precedent in Lagos. From the nineteenth century, missionaries had kept detailed journals of their Nigerian travels to be published by their parent organisations, such as the Church Missionary Society and the Southern Baptist Convention. Local and/or Saro missionaries also published accounts of their travels; Samuel Ajayi Crowther published an English-language account of a journey 'from Lokoja to Bida, on the River Niger, and thence to Lagos, on the sea coast from November 10th 1871, to February 8, 1872,' while Bishop S.C. Phillips turned brief notes in Yoruba in his diary into a full day-by-day narrative of a journey around Ondo in 1928. Such reports were available in Lagos at the time, and the newspaper travel writers may have read them, ensconced as they were in early Christian circles in Lagos. Many more travel narratives by both foreign and local travellers went unpublished. American Baptist missionary William Clarke's accounts of his travels around the Yoruba-speaking region in 1854-58, for instance, were not published for over a hundred years, until Nigerian historian

24 Oral praise or attributive poetry.
25 I use the term 'local' here to refer to non-European or non-American missionaries and clergy, usually from Lagos or Sierra Leone, often Saros who claimed ancestry in the Yoruba-speaking region.
26 Many such unpublished accounts are available in the diaries, journals and letters preserved in the National Archives of Nigeria in Ibadan.
J.A. Atanda published an edited edition, stressing its importance as both Yoruba and missionary history.²⁷

Outside the missions, European and American colonial travellers and explorers wrote accounts of their journeys to Nigeria, a few of which become canonical, such as the accounts of Mary Slessor, Anna Hinderer and Mary Kingsley. The Lagos newspapers printed foreign travel writing about Lagos; the Lagos Weekly Record of 1910, for instance, printed an article called ‘Impressions of Lagos’ by Frank Voce,²⁸ followed by ‘Lagos Through Foreign Eyes’ by ‘A Traveller’.²⁹ Travel accounts by Europeans in Nigeria were reviewed in the Lagos newspapers with a familiarity with the conventions of travel writing. The Lagos Standard gave a sardonic account of a talk in London by ‘Captain E.A. Steel, RFA,’ who had taken part in an expedition in Southern Nigeria. Deploring Steel’s account of tribes, bows and arrows, human sacrifice and fattening ceremonies, the Standard retorts ‘It is surprising that at this enlightened day, any one should be found bold enough to try to palm off such tales upon the public, and more surprising still that people are to be found who are simple enough to listen to, and receive them in all seriousness[…]What the average stay-at-home Englishman does not know about West Africa and West African affairs would fill a large book’.³⁰

It is conceivable that this circulating travel writing influenced the newspaper travel narratives. They shared a first-person narrative, often an epistolary format, observations of people and places, and linear chronological ordering. Though the newspaper travel writers never alluded to such narratives, the existence of these texts may have alerted them to a useful genre, and moreover to have validated it as a legitimate enterprise, tied up in the signifiers of ‘civilisation’. This is not to say, however, that the travel writers were ‘localising’ or ‘hybridising’ a European genre; the travel narratives grew out of a specific local experimentation with genre, style and form, and also out of a complex relationship between Lagos, the Yoruba-speaking hinterland, and the rest of Nigeria, as I start to demonstrate in this article. Unlike the comparative case of Swahili habari travelogues, the newspaper travel writers were not encouraged in their writing by European colonial officials or scholars, who in the Swahili context saw habari as valuable ethno-historical material.³¹ The remainder of this article explores some of the local contexts and discourses out of which Lagos travel writing emerged, looking in particular at the writers’ ideas about the benefits of travel writing, and travel as a signifier of ‘civilisation’.

An elite group of writers and travellers

By the early twentieth century the newspapers were reporting increasingly on the social, business and political travels of elite locals within Nigeria, and between the West African coast and England. Travel by road and rail was still an expensive and exclusive pursuit; by the 1930s there were around 700 new cars registered in Nigeria each year.³² The steamers and railways were run by the colonial authorities or European companies. But travel was gradually opening up to a wider social base. Despite their elite outlook, the newspapers called for an increase in third class carriages on trains, and reported with approval the rise in train passengers from the Hinterland. As well as noting (perhaps somewhat regretfully) how many ‘ordinary’ Lagosians owned bicycles and used the trams, as early as 1913 the Weekly Record was documenting the

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growth of ‘native’-owned transport operators in Lagos such as the Obasa ‘Anfani’ bus and the Dawodu transport service.

Occasionally the travels of non-elites made it into print, such as the memoirs of the pseudonymous ‘Joe Mullen,’ a soldier who travelled from the Gold Coast to Cameroon to fight during the First World War, and whose diaries of his travels were printed in the Gold Coast Leader. Mullen’s text, Stephanie Newell points out, is an unusual instance of the voice of an ‘ordinary’ Gold Coaster, a clerk of the ‘intermediate classes’ being given space in the otherwise elite Gold Coast newspapers. The Nigerian papers similarly occasionally related stories and reports from regional correspondents in which we glimpse the travel of non-elite ‘natives,’ but these accounts are often fragments only, retold by the papers with the travellers’ own voices obscured.

As Echeruo has suggested, Lagos’s elite saw themselves at this time as distinct from the hinterland in their claims to ‘civilization’. Many of the Lagos elite, who were mostly Christians, had by this time undergone education in English, and could write equally as well in English and Yoruba. The Yoruba newspapers, as Karin Barber has shown, had a paternalistic, didactic attitude towards non-elite Lagosians, whom they saw themselves as championing. They wrote their newspapers in Yoruba partly to cater to a middling group who had some literacy in Yoruba, but not English. Simultaneously, a growing number of Lagosians were re-claiming their ancestral links to the Yoruba-speaking hinterland, and the newspapers often printed articles about Yoruba history and culture.

The travel writers were a close-knit group of Lagosians who shared a distinctive background, and who, judging by the newspapers, knew intimately of one another’s comings and goings. Their position somewhat echoes that of the ‘creole pioneers’ Benedict Anderson identifies as central to early south American print culture and nationalism, but unlike Anderson’s southern American creole pioneers, born in south America but of Spanish ancestry, Lagos’s intellectual elite were not intellectually and socially homeless, of neither European culture nor Yoruba. Rather, they were a self-confident group who considered themselves distinctly Lagosian in their in-between-ness, who saw themselves to bear the responsibility of translating ‘civilised’ life into specific local circumstances, and who resisted European colonial culture and politics when they saw it to be at fault. There were variations in politics in the Lagos newspapers of the 1920s, but what they shared was a certainty that they were the intellectual powerhouse of Lagos, and a fondness for fierce and often florid debate over the issues of the day.

Why travelling and travel writing?

The Lagos travel writers’ motivation for travelling was not, in the first instance, to publish travel writing. For Thomas especially, travelling was a necessity of his work as a newspaper editor, stemming from the need to sell his newspaper and extend its geographical reach. In the opening instalment of his 1929 ‘Ero L’Ọna’, Thomas informs his readers that he is setting out on a journey ‘for the benefit and the progress of this newspaper,’ and he reminisces about a previous journey as far as Minna, Jos, Kaduna and Kano which ‘made my newspaper many friends’. In his 1931 tour, he reports on the success of these marketing trips: ‘the newspaper

34 Echeruo, Victorian Lagos, pp. 29-49.
35 Barber, Print Culture, pp. 32-33.
Akede Eko has become exceedingly well-established in Ileṣa, the fame of Akede Eko has no competitor in Ileṣa[...][I also tried to establish my newspaper Akede Eko in these new towns: Oyo, Awẹ, Ogbomoṣo, Akure, Ondo, Ọwọ, Benin City, Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, and not forgetting Port Harcourt, where Akede Eko has become a native of that town.]

Thomas markets the newspaper in any spare moment on the journey to the local literate elites, manipulating his personal networks:

‘I had a great opportunity that evening to announce or advertise my newspaper Akede Eko in the meeting of the District Council this evening in Ijebu-Ode. I got this opportunity thanks to my dear friend, the slender and kind-hearted gentleman, the highly respected D.A. Fawehinmi, who had begged for this great opportunity for me from Archdeacon S.C. Phillips, who is the Chairman of the great District Council.’

It was not all networking and meetings, though. The word Thomas uses to describe selling the newspaper is ‘ipolówọ,’ meaning ‘hawking,’ and indeed, Thomas claims he ‘went all day, from morning till evening, in the heat of the sun through all of Port Harcourt in order to hawk my newspaper to all the people from door-to-door. My lower back wanted to snap because of the bicycle which I rode until dark today.’

Beyond business interests, local politics stimulated many of the journeys, particularly shorter narratives detailing visits by Associations to their hometowns. Even those who were not travelling for specifically political reasons were interested in current affairs and regional politics; both Thomas and Akintan write of visiting the deposed Eleko of Lagos in exile in the hinterland town of Oyo, offering descriptions of their ‘great sorrow’ at his plight. Many of the travel writers pay visits to Òbas and other political leaders, not just out of the necessity of receiving an Òba’s blessing to visit a town, but also to display their entrenchment in the politics of the region.

But beyond these pragmatic reasons for travelling, the travel writers also conceived of benefits to themselves and their readers from both travelling and travel writing. Many of the writers saw travel narratives as a form of near-mimesis which could give stay-at-home readers access to the edification to be gained from travelling. Before beginning the 1929 series of ‘Ero L’Ọna’, Thomas devotes a whole article titled ‘Irin-Ajo’ (‘Journeys’ or ‘Travelling’) to the importance of travel and travel writing. He begins by remarking that travelling represents ‘an

38 ‘[I]rohin “Akede Eko” yi ti fi ese mu’le to ni igboro ilu Ilesha, okiki iwe irohin “Akede Eko” ko ni egbe ni igboro ilu Ilesha[...] mo ti tun gbiyanju lati fi ese iwe irohin “Akede Eko” na mu’le ninu awọn ilu titun wonyi bi:- Oyo, Awẹ, Ogbomoṣo, Akure, Ondo, Ọwọ, Benin City, Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, laiso ti ilu Port Harcourt to jẹ pe iwe irohin “Akede Eko” ti di onile ati ọlọna ni igboro ilu na’; I.B. Thomas, ‘Ero L’Ọna’, Akede Eko (March 14, 1931), p. 6. All translations from newspapers in this article are my own.


41 The Eleko was the monarch of Lagos who had been deposed and exiled to Oyo by the colonial government in 1925.


43 As Karin Barber has shown, it was the Eleko’s exile that had itself prompted the founding of several of the Yoruba newspapers, in response to the political crisis that ensued; Barber, Print Culture, p. 32.
important opportunity in our lives, as human beings,44 and encourages 'our people' to travel more:

‘And it would be a very good thing if we were to see some of our people once in a while travelling about the world, as an education, and most particularly to see the great work of God in foreign lands.’45

Thomas reminds his readers that they are fortunate to have opportunities to travel:

‘Many people will remember that in the olden days it would take a traveller several days on the road to get from Lagos to Abeokuta, but today, if one leaves Lagos for Abeokuta in the morning, that person will eat lunch in Abeokuta. We give this as one small example, because many of you, our readers, will remember other things like this, about the opportunities for travel that we all have in today's world.’46

Thomas encourages his readers to take advantage of this ease of travelling, since 'it is very good to travel’47 and moreover remarks that it is a pity that many Lagosians who have travelled do not ‘talk about all the things they laid eyes on during the journey, for their acquaintances to hear’.48 He concludes his piece by advising the reader to '[b]e prepared to see wisdom written in the beautiful journeys of the respected Editor.’49 For Thomas, then, the benefits of travelling such as ogbón (wisdom or good sense) are conferred not only on the traveller, but also on those who hear about the journey; the ideal traveller should broadcast his or her experience more widely, and print allows Thomas to do this.

In 1950, the Yoruba Translation Committee of Ibadan published a pamphlet called ‘Anfani Irin-Ajo' ('The Benefits of Travel'), a Yoruba translation of an Efik text by E.N. Amaku, a novelist and poet from Calabar.50 Though this pamphlet was published later and outside Lagos, it nonetheless draws on strikingly similar ideas about travel. Amaku writes that 'there is scarcely anything in this world which offers more benefits for people than travelling'.51 He adds that '[s]ince time immemorial people have known these benefits. In all kinds of town and times we have seen brave travellers; several of them are famous people’.52 Amongst other benefits such as gaining expertise in trade, and health benefits, he devotes much of the first part of the pamphlet to the benefits of knowing places beyond one’s own home: 'great hills,' he tells us, 'with fog covering their peaks, the wide sea which goes on forever, and the things that dwell in it, are not things that we can see near us. The traveller alone can enjoy these things in

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various towns’. To this list of natural wonders he adds ‘dazzling houses, ships, aeroplanes, bridges over rivers, huge lorries and great towns’.

As well as the variety and glory of nature and manmade spectacle, Amaku points to the benefits of travel in terms of knowledge: ‘travelling will teach you how to know the character of others through visiting them, and experiencing their behaviour and their surroundings, and he explains how one can judge the character of one’s own town and people better once one has travelled out so one has something to compare it to. He concludes by arguing for the importance of travelling as education:

‘It’s no exaggeration, the lessons that we learn on a journey have no comparison. The traveller sees for himself things that we tell other people about. The lessons learnt by someone who is travelling about like this will be more permanent than those of the person who sits in one place.’

For Amaku, then, one of the important benefits of travel was lessons or education, gained by seeing a place with one’s own eyes, and by taking that knowledge back home to better evaluate one’s people and their way of life. The Lagos newspaper travelogues shared this sense of the importance of educating their readers through travel and travel writing. In his 1926 ‘Ero L’Ọna’, Thomas asks his readers to ‘please read my news as a lesson’, and explains that he is writing for ‘the benefit of you our readers, men and women, children and elders, who have not yet had the opportunity to travel on the sea or by car around the land’.

But what exactly were these lessons? Despite their expectation of self-improvement through knowledge, these texts are not voyages of self-discovery, as David Spurr identifies in ‘an entire tradition of Western travel writing which makes the experience of the non-Western world into an inner journey, and in doing so renders that world as insubstantial, as the backdrop of baseless fabric against which is played the drama of the writer’s self’. Thomas, for instance, envisions himself as a reporter substantiating the country beyond Lagos for his readers: ‘Since I have the opportunity to go and know these important Itsekiri and Ijaw towns themselves,’ he writes, ‘this will give me a great chance to give you interesting news about the characteristics and ways of these people in the land of their birth’. He particularly enjoys reporting on the Itsekiri greeting he picks up:

‘As I stood on the edge of the road to my house, I heard: ‘Ndo, ado! Ndo, ado! Ndo, ado!!!’ This was the language that the Itsekiri were using to greet one another. They have no other words for greetings, just this alone. If they greet you in the

53 ‘Awọn oke nlanla, ti ikuku bo ọmọ orin ọmọ, omi okun nla ti o te lo titi ati awọn ohun ti oṣe ninu rẹ ki isẹ ohun ti a le ri nitosi wa. Arinrinajo nikan ni o le gbadun awọn nkan wọnyi ni ilu miran’; Amaku, ‘Anfani Irin-Ajo’, p. 5.
59 Bi o ti je pe mo ni anfani lati ọmọ awọn ilu pataki to je ilu awọn Ọṣẹkiri ati lijo papa, eyi yio fun mi laye dada lati fun nyin ni irohin aladun nipa ọṣesi ati ilo awọn enia wọnyi ni ile ti a bi wọn sī’; I.B. Thomas, ‘Ero L’Ọna’, Eleti-Ọfẹ (June 2 1926), p. 8.
morning, or the afternoon, or the evening, or if they offer condolences for anything in life, there are no other words, just ‘Ndo, ado! Ndo, ado! Ndo, ado!!!’

He repeats this greeting several times, even entreatling his readers to join him in using the greeting. Thomas expects his readers to share the knowledge he gains from his journey, whether the particular details he imparts about places, or the more general knowledge of the world beyond Lagos.

Sometimes the lessons these writers sought to teach their readers were not so much information about other places as moral and social lessons, tied up with observations about the nature of travelling. Akintan is able ‘pull a little lesson’ about life and death out of the rituals of his train journey to Ibadan:

‘To my eyes the train resembled this world in which we live: when we are born into it, we are there with our Tickets, some go on short journeys, perhaps from Lagos to Agege; others go on quite a long journey, such as Alagbado to Lafenwa, and others go on a huge journey, from Ifo to Ibadan or Kano, thus I started to think these things to myself. As each person produced his Ticket for the conductor when they got down, so we human beings leave our tickets before we can leave life; as the journeys of some are not so far, so the days of others are not far, in the world before they go.

I thought again to myself: as they happily greeted those who got off, so, over there, they will welcome with happiness those who die. As they happily greeted those new ones who just entered the train, so we ourselves happily greet newborn children who have just come into the world. Thus it was that I sat in a quiet corner of the train where I was thinking all these things.’

Akintan characterises his extended metaphor as a ‘lesson’ (èkò) for both himself and his readers. Elsewhere, travel writers similarly use Yoruba proverbs to instruct their readers in the social or moral truths, with Thomas in particular frequently quoting the proverb: ‘We don’t make friends with a traveller in order to rejoice, for the traveller will return home tomorrow.’

There was also a sense of ‘civilisation’ tied up with ‘knowledge’. Transport and travel were closely associated with both colonialism and ‘civilisation’, a concept which was typically expressed in the newspapers as òlajú (‘civilisation’ or ‘enlightenment’) or ilòsìwàjú (‘progress’ or ‘development’). In his classic study of òlajú, J.D.Y. Peel argues that the notion of òlajú is specifically linked in Yoruba discourse to individual and collective exposure to the outside world.
world (both local and global), particularly education, world religions, external travel and trade, and so to coming to ‘enlightenment’ and new ideas through access to a mixture of local and foreign influences. From the colonial era, ọ̀lajú began to be used to refer to the ‘cultural package’ brought from outside by missionaries. Lisa Lindsay suggests that while colonial notions of ‘modernization’ encapsulated ideas about industrialisation, labour, regulation of time and the nuclear family, ọ̀lajú suggested a different conception of ‘enlightenment,’ used to describe ‘those who were not necessarily well-educated, but who gained worldly knowledge by pursuing trading opportunities away from the hometown.’

As Lindsay describes, railway workers in the 1950s were encouraged with a free travel allowance to travel the railways during their free time. But as early as 1913 the Lagos Weekly Record had reported approvingly on the beginnings of such a scheme:

‘The grant of free passages to Native Clerks in the Government Service and their families on Government vessels and railways is a generous provision which should encourage clerks on leave to travel and widen their ideas. The clerks are poorly paid as a rule and this provision confers on them a great boon.’

The newspaper envisages workers ‘widening their ideas’ by travelling; Lindsay points out, too, that while the colonial authorities saw the free travel allowance as a way of allowing migrant workers to maintain contact with ‘extended families’ in their hometowns (reinforcing colonial conceptions about migrant labour and family ties), workers themselves often split their travel allowances between their hometowns and elsewhere, ‘exploring unfamiliar parts of the country’. One of the train drivers Lindsay spoke to explained that he travelled to faraway places such as Enugu and Kano during his leave, for the sake of knowledge and self-improvement: ‘I can tell more of these places than someone who has not travelled’. Such travel, Lindsay argues, contributed to the railway workers’ image of themselves as ‘modern, cosmopolitan’ men.

There was simultaneously a discourse developing in the Lagos newspapers about the value of travel as a leisure activity, which drew on similarly complex notions of ‘civilisation’. Though West Africans had been travelling for a variety of purposes for thousands of years, pleasure and leisure travel by train and steamer seemed a ‘civilised,’ innovative and newsworthy form of travel to the papers. In 1907 the Standard began a campaign to encourage leisure travel. Three times that year, it called for dedicated boats and trains for leisure outings:

‘The usual places of resort on public holidays – Victoria and Ebute Metta – were thronged with holiday-makers on Easter Monday. It is to be regretted that no other places are available for persons who, once or twice a year, the only times they have to spare, would like a change from the stereotyped and dull routine of life in Lagos. With a railway running some hundred miles into the interior, there is no reason why excursion trains might not be run on holiday occasions to some point in the Hinterland, giving people the advantage of seeing something of the country without loss of time from business.’

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68 Lindsay, Working with Gender, p. 156.
69 Ibid., p. 156.
By 1913, the authorities seemed to be in agreement with the papers, and a ‘Special Excursion Train’ was put on for the August Bank Holiday, running between Lagos and Abeokuta.

The Lagos travel writers did not see themselves as tourists or leisure travellers; as we have seen, they were travelling for business. But in their travels they began, perhaps inadvertently, ‘scripting’ tentative leisure travel routes that would persist for another hundred years (in Derek Gregory’s sense of the performative ‘scripting’ of European tourist routes in colonial Egypt); so, for instance, Ajiṣafẹ, Akintan and Thomas all visit Ile-Ife, the mythical home of all the Yoruba people, and a site which became an important part of the Nigerian tourist route, traced by guidebooks and travel writers alike.

If the discourse of ọ̀lajú emphasises the benefits of travel, however, ‘civilisation’ also brought its discontents. At the same time as the newspapers celebrated the spectacle of new travel infrastructure, they wrote of accidents between bicycles and pedestrians, of shipwrecks and train derailing, of hinterland ‘natives’ failing to understand the dangers of crossing the road in front of trains. They use travel to critique ‘civilization’; the Standard remarks:

‘All the hurry, bustle and activity of modern civilised life, the railroad pace at which everything moves, the high pressure state of existence, the dress, the food, and other acquired tastes are, it will be confessed, but ill-adapted to local requirements. The African was not made for such a life [...] A return to the simple life is the urgent call to the educated Native in West Africa.’

The newspapers reported transport and travel as a sphere where colonial power was made manifest. The more radical papers sometimes reported on travel as a site of conflict or disparity between coloniser and ‘native’. In 1909, the Lagos Standard complains of how railway passengers had been forced to stand in the corridor: ‘the only reason for all the inconvenience experienced was that several European passengers, who were in first class, had made a pantry of the second class where their pots and pans with their boys were placed’. I.B. Thomas was outraged at how Nigerian steamer passengers had to undergo humiliating quarantine procedures while European passengers did not. The newspapers thus also constructed travel as a site where colonial power was made manifest, where the stratifying politics of colonialism were played out, and sometimes resisted.

Many writers in the newspapers emphasised the visual and auditory spectacle of the new colonial forms of transport, their incredible speed and ability to telescope distance, and I draw on Brian Larkin’s concept of the ‘colonial sublime’ to suggest that this spectacle helped reinforce the power of the colonial regime. The newspapers wondered at the railways’ speed and comfort and their great power to transform the landscape, honeycombing the continent, spectacularly telescoping journey times and opening up new routes. The newspapers were proud of the pace of ‘progress’, and keen to show that they were well-connected and well-informed about the growth of travel infrastructure.

Educated, elite Lagosians who had been exposed to colonial transport for some time still wondered at the spectacle of travel, sometimes to their own benefit. I.B. Thomas’s account of his journey by German steamer to Port Harcourt emphasises his ‘resplendent enjoyment’ on board the ship, the ‘delicious meals that they spread before me in infinite amounts’, the three

beds provided just for him with 'light and fluffy pillows'\textsuperscript{78} and electric fans, which 'worked all night'.\textsuperscript{79} When Thomas later encounters a car belonging to friends in Aba, south-eastern Nigeria, he again stresses the spectacle of the encounter: the car is 'fine'\textsuperscript{80} and 'glorious' or 'dazzling',\textsuperscript{81} so much so that it resembles the car that the Governor himself uses to 'show off his splendour in Lagos'.\textsuperscript{82} But Thomas also gestures here towards the use of spectacle to reflect his own power rather than simply to overwhelm and dazzle him. The driver of the car, who is also decked out 'in splendid style'\textsuperscript{83} is dressed this way, Thomas jokes, because he had been told he was driving the editor of the \textit{Akede Eko}, and that if he did not impress him, the paper would 'proclaim it for the world to hear'.\textsuperscript{84} Though Thomas is dazzled by the car, the car impresses him through a calculated display of spectacle rather than because of any ignorance or naivety on Thomas's part. Thomas's own power generates the owner's desire to impress him through spectacle; moreover, that power is produced by Thomas's ability to manipulate the printed word.

Beyond these associations of travel with knowledge and spectacle, I.B. Thomas also claims an interest in wandering out of curiosity. While his steamer stops in Burutu, for instance, he 'used those two days to see the sights',\textsuperscript{85} During his lengthy stay in Sapẹlẹ, he takes a trip on the Benin River for 'an enjoyable rest and relaxation',\textsuperscript{86} and explores the nearby town. Though Thomas is by no means a flâneur, he has an eye for gaining something from the travelling beyond his business interests. He also wields a romanticism about travel, as he reflects on his reasons for travelling despite his supposed reluctance:

'But what's to be done, friends, when money, which the Hausas call \textit{Kudi}, is calling you and won't be silent? Can you hear and pay no attention? By force you will have to answer the call; one wise Englishman said as much when he said that "Where duty calls Man must obey".\textsuperscript{88}

This romantic sense of \textit{Kudi}, exoticised by the use of the Hausa word, 'calling' him to leave is counterpointed by his discussion of how \textit{kádàrá} (a Yoruba ontological concept approximating to 'destiny' or 'predestination') similarly calls him to travel; though he experiences 'great sorrow' in leaving home, he asks: 'but what can one do except accept one's \textit{kadara}?\textsuperscript{89} Thomas's invocation of \textit{kádàrá} and \textit{kudi} is typical of the rhetorical flourishes that pepper his text, but Thomas also uses this term to underline his exceptionalism as a traveller, as someone who travels more than most, because of the 'destiny' that has been allocated to him. Thomas often draws attention to how extensively he has travelled; he tells us he has travelled 'since I was a...'}

\textsuperscript{80} '[D]aradara'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (May 6, 1929), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{81} '[A]larabara'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (May 6, 1929), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{82} '[G]be ọṣọ yọ ni igboro Eko'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (May 6, 1929), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{83} '[F]a ọṣọ yọ nipataki'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (May 6, 1929), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{84} '[B]i iwọ ko ba fa ọjẹ yọ, Akede yio kede re fun araiye gbo'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (May 6, 1929), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{87} 'Kudi' is the Hausa word for 'money' or 'wealth', also with the sense of 'trade' or 'profit'.
\textsuperscript{88} 'Ṣugbọn ewo ni ṣiše, ẹnikẹji, nigbati owo ti awọn Gambari npe ni \textit{Kudi} npe o, ti ko si dake, ọwọ ha le ni ọwọ ngbọ agbọya bi? Pelu tulas iwo yio ni lati jẹ ọpọ na; Oyinbo ọlogbọn kan ti soro tan nigbati o so bayi pe:-
\textsuperscript{89} 'Ṣugbọn ewo ha ni ṣiše, ẹni ṣe, lẹhin pe ki oluware gba "kadara"'; I.B. Thomas, 'Ero L’Ọna', \textit{Akede Eko} (April 11, 1929), p. 7.
babe in arms, countless times across the sea, with my parents’, and from the time he was twelve years old I had been sent from Lagos to go to towns like Calabar, Bonny, Victoria, Cameroon, Fernando Po, Port Harcourt, and other towns besides.

Thomas also describes a more immediate sense of ‘duty’ calling him to travel, not only for the progress of his newspaper, but also for society at large:

‘The people who read Akede Eko were as pleased to see me as to see an Oba! They were all very pleased to lay their eyes on me. And they were all very surprised to see that a young man like me, a small boy, is doing this kind of important work, for the good and the progress of the homeland of us black people. But it is the work of God!’

Thomas suggests that others shared this view of the importance of the paper in the ‘progress’ of Africa; in Ogbomọ, he tells us, he visits N.D. Oyerinde, a local intellectual and historian, who ‘praised me very much, saying that I was an intrepid editor, and he told me that it was very good that newspaper editors should travel to see and experience other things and towns like this, to report in their newspapers’. Thomas seems to suggest that the distribution of his newspaper, and thence the spread of print culture, literacy and ‘civilised’ values, is his most important work, but in his report of Oyerinde’s praise he also suggests that he saw his travel writing itself as being of social benefit.

In these travel narratives, the notion of ọ̀lajù has become individualised, with travel seen to benefit the individual, rather than the broader community. And yet, at the same time, travel writing becomes important as a way of broadcasting the benefits of travel more widely amongst the newspaper readers. The texts, however, are not mimetic in the sense that they appear to faithfully replicate the experience of travelling; these are very textual texts, overtly constructed as partial, incomplete narratives. Thomas momentarily allows a rupture in his rhetoric of the value of travel as he remarks on the singularity of his experience: ‘the things the eyes see in a strange place can’t be spoken of when one gets home,’ he tells us. Nonetheless, the writers aim to reproduce enough of the knowledge gained through travel to be able to confer it on their readers.

However, this travel writing is not educational in the sense of documenting people and places for posterity. Geider posits a close connection between auto-ethnography or ethno-history and travel writing in Swahili travelogues, part of the habari genre of historical writing, which were concerned with documenting their own culture, which they saw as distinctly local, under threat from the incoming colonial ‘modernity’ of the early twentieth century. This desire to create a body of local knowledge about places and cultures is not at play in the Lagosian travel narratives, nor is there a desire to document one’s own culture and locality to counter outsiders’ ethnography, history or travel writing. Instead, most of the travel writers’ texts are very rooted in their particular specificity in time and space; they are highly personalised narratives based on the writers’ own experiences and itineraries, rather than

95 Geider, ‘Early Swahili Travelogues’.
attempting to make more universal or timeless statements about the places to which they travel. Thomas’s narratives in particular are suffused with his very bodily presence, as he writes frequently of his body and its functions, of his sweat, tears, backaches, clothes, tiredness, hunger and coldness.

This is not to say the writers are not interested in recording details about other people that they find striking. Akintan, for instance, sometimes describes local food on his journey throughout the Yoruba-speaking region, while Thomas describes dressing up for fun for photographs with his Lagosian host in Warri ‘in the native clothing of the Itsekiri,’ and describes, as he walks from Oyo to Abe, the ‘black kijipa cloth’ the locals were wearing. But these occasional details are not documented systematically or extensively, and the writers tend not to interpret them as anything beyond local colour or evidence of a lack of Lagosian ‘civilisation’. Writers similarly do not engage in cultural collecting, documenting oral culture or local idiosyncrasies of history and language, as the writers of contemporaneous town histories (such as A.K. Ajisafe) do, except for occasional fragments of greetings.

**Conclusion: Lagosian travel writing as a product of print culture**

The travel writers of the Lagos newspapers of the 1920s and 30s were travelling primarily to develop the business interests and audiences of their newspapers, but travel narratives proved a useful forum for them to develop other preoccupations, such as displaying their sociability and their ‘civilised’ nature, and thinking about changing local and regional affiliations in the newly formed Nigeria. The travel narratives were an output of an increasingly confident and experimental Yoruba print culture which was playing with new ways of convening and addressing its audiences and new genres and rhetorical styles. The travel narratives were, above all, distinctively a product of print in early 20th century Lagos, which enabled them to bring together intertexts, to experiment with new forms, to address their known but growing audiences and to broadcast to these audiences the perceived benefits of travel.

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