Letters, Kinship, and Social Mobility in Nigeria

by Olufemi Vaughan
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Letters, Kinship and Social Mobility reads like a generational sequel to Ade-Ajayi's *Christian Missions in Nigeria* (1965) and is as groundbreaking as the classic. It recovers a family and associational trajectory of the CMS' evangelical and educational mission from which a new Westernised elite grew amidst a colonially propelled transformation of Yoruba culture and society. While *Christian Missions* relied mainly on missionary and British colonial records, Olufemi Vaughan uniquely employs his family's comprehensive letters and correspondences to uncover the wide range of everyday social and economic issues that the *new elite* had to navigate and purportedly from which modern Yoruba society evolved within the context of British Nigeria. These letters centred on his father, Abiodun Alfred Vaughan in correspondence with his mother, wives, brother and sisters, his colleagues, friends and associates, and the kinship they maintained within the CMS church and educational system, their colonial employment and within a social and economic system which was only tangentially colonial. Their careers, travels, kinship and friendships operated within Nigeria and across the Atlantic circuits, connecting the themes and locations where the Westernised elite propelled social change in West Africa.

Olufemi Vaughan's main purpose is not directly about grand narratives of colonialism, nationalism, missions, etc., instead focusing on the new elite as they navigated these issues in their everyday lives. He confronts the dilemma of the scholar over what to do with uniquely abundant sources that speak to multiple themes of scholarly interest by focusing specifically on the hermeneutics of the letters, providing important social and political contexts, carefully mapping his interjections as necessary, and I suppose, leaving informed readers to draw connections within their disciplines as they deem. *Letters* successfully narrates Abiodun Vaughan's story through his correspondences, but also offers insights for those invested in family and generational studies, educated elites, clerks, intermediaries and interpreters, progressive unions, civic and associational life, Yoruba ethnogenesis and Nigerian nationalism.

Vaughan frames the kinship relationships around Yoruba concepts of *alajobi* (lit. blood family) and *alajogbe* (friends, colleagues and brethren). The family letters reflect both natal bonds and struggles to keep the extended family together as it fragmented beyond the nuclear household, and against the demands of challenging careers, individual aspirations and social expectations,

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and across vast distances. The profile of the family that comes across is not an elite one by Ibadan standards, as it lacks wealth or land, owns a single natal homestead and is not deeply rooted in indigenous society. Yet, it is typical of the progressivist narrative of the Westernised Africans crafting spaces within indigenous and colonial spheres by advancing claims of *olaju* modernity, adapting to indigenous conditions and using colonial resources. It depicts material and professional advancements as kins build their own families, houses and careers and seek public recognition and political offices. *Alajogbe* friendships and associational life are structured within these shared roots and aspirations, and they extend kinship beyond blood relations.

There is no acclaim here for the relevance of British colonial governance to the lives of colonial subjects. After more than many decades of British rule the postal service is almost non-existent or ineffective, there are no building codes or vocational standards for construction, banking is not effective, medical care is sparse and unreliable, there is no public information and crime is not policed (p. 66). In the absences of governance, kinship and associational ties are strengthened and endure despite their strains. Family and friends are relied on to provide banking and credit facilities, share information, source healing properties across distances and protect themselves. For the Westernised elite, there are not many colonial resources to access apart from their self-consciousness of the importance of their colonial careers, education and language. Organised in small struggling families, they forged associations of like minds to sustain and expand their holdings. It may indeed be claimed that they advanced colonial modernity beyond the capacity of the British colonisers.

There is no factual basis for any critical evaluation of the book because the author carefully established its narrow purpose (p. 8). It is only as it connects to the broader themes of Yoruba and Nigeria's colonial history that questions may be explored regarding the applicability of concepts and the significance of characters and events. Read differently from the author's perspective, the Vaughan kins and associates were new settlers or 'strangers' in Ibadan. They separated or were excluded from indigenous cultural community – their natal family and Christian associations were their only meaningful Ibadan identity, and they may fit the mould of Ayandele's *hybrids* (1974). Vaughan's claim that 'they were sustained by Yoruba customs, norms, and traditions' (p. 78) appears to project the naturalisation of the Westernised, and it maybe unintentionally resurrects the debates over Yoruba culture set out in Peel's *Ethnogenesis* (1989). Did the Westernised adopt, adapt or create *alajobi*? The material needs of a newly settled and expanding family for kinship and bonding may be different from longstanding indigenous practices. Claiming that this was the Yoruba way does not aid our understanding of Yoruba dynamism, rather it appears to obfuscate it and may be authenticating an intellectual imposition.

Methodological issues with using personal letters as historical sources are glaring. Despite reporting the quotidian lives of historical actors, *Letters* remains slanted towards the perspectives of letter writers. Strive as he might, Olufemi Vaughan does not escape the subjectiveness of his involvement

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as a family member. If only the thoughts of Ariyibi may be recovered outside of the curtness of his letters, which may really be the expressions of thankless patriarchal burdens, duties and responsibilities. Then, he may not come across as insensitive and difficult.

Regardless, such is the richness and density of lived experiences in this book that it will tempt scholars to apply it on either side of our scholarly debates. Many will find validation of feminist power and influence from Maryam's matriarchy but be chagrined at the hierarchical subordination of the 'lesser' wives. Those who celebrate communal living will also confront the loss of agency and privacy depicted in these experiences. Yet even if Vaughan points attention to these issues, he makes no pretention about the limited nature of the texts, the inadequacy of letters as historical texts, or even of their connections to the broader social, economic and political environment of the Vaughan experience. This book will be discussed a lot.

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Children of the Soil: the power of built form in urban Madagascar

by Tasha Rijke-Epstein
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In this captivating book, Tasha Rijke-Epstein explores the fascinating history of Mahajanga, in the north-eastern coast of Madagascar, since its foundation in the mid-eighteen century up to the 1970s. By interlacing the agency of human and non-human actors and mapping their contribution to the shaping of the urban space, the book offers a rich description of the many waves of Swahili, Sakalava, Indians, Merina and Comorians migrants that built and transformed the city across different historical periods. Rijke-Epstein addresses the different political