

BOOK REVIEW

Olufemi Vaughan. *Letters, Kinship, and Social Mobility in Nigeria*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. xvii + 256 pp. Maps. Appendix. Notes. Index. \$22.95. Paper. ISBN: 780299344504.

How much can privately held family letters tell us about how people experienced the economic, cultural, and political changes that manifested in Nigeria, first under colonial rule and second, as a consequence of the postcolonial state-making project? In *Letters, Kinship, and Social Mobility in Nigeria*, Olufemi Vaughan uses his family's letters, spanning four generations, to show how a specific class of Nigerians—Western-educated Yorùbá Christians—navigated belonging, dealt with intra-family issues, and kept up in an evolving society.

The monograph's central source is a group of roughly five thousand documents, including three thousand letters (written in both English and Yorùbá), collected by Abiodun Vaughan, the author's father, spanning 1926 to 1994. These letters were mainly between Abiodun Vaughan and his immediate relatives, friends, and coworkers. In addition to the family documents and letters, Olufemi Vaughan uses oral history and written materials collected at the Nigerian National Archives in Ibadan and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Archives in Birmingham to construct this micro-history. The CMS community in Ibadan is central to the Vaughan family's history. From the mid-nineteenth century, the CMS community provided mutual aid space, education, and medical services to Yorùbá Christians. For the Vaughans, the CMS community in Ibadan served an additional purpose: a conduit connecting family members dispersed across different geographical spaces, offering a sense of shared identity that fortified kinship ties.

Several Vaughan letter writers got involved in the Nigerian civil service. Others pursued white-collar careers and higher education, necessitating movement away from their ancestral home in Ibadan for several years and sometimes resettling elsewhere permanently. Some Vaughan family members were also domiciled in Freetown, Sierra Leone. To the Vaughans and several of their compatriots presented with a similar reality, conquering the geographical barrier was critical to the survival of familial relations and the maintenance of kinship ties. It is against this backdrop that Olufemi Vaughan considers how the Vaughan letter writers strived to preserve the Yorùbá values of *àjòbí* (consanguinity) and *àjogbé* (co-residence) amid such a barrier.

The Vaughan family letters echo some of the aged arguments in colonial African history. For example, these letters show how changing labor and dependency dynamics within families and the desire to marry well were some of the concerns that shaped conversations among elite families in the colonial and

postcolonial periods. Also, this monograph could be treated as a narrative about colonial-era Christian elite formation and how this formation was consolidated in the postcolonial period.

Letters, Kinship, and Social Mobility in Nigeria is divided into chapters arranged thematically and chronologically in accordance with how Abiodun Vaughan organized the family documents. Each chapter creates a narrative about a given set of letters, often emphasizing the national milieu within which these letters were written. The narrative is then followed by a two- to three-page summary conveying the author's reflections.


The set of letters considered in Chapter One illustrates how family members debated the reconstruction of the Vaughan family house in Ibadan amid the issue of remittance. The second chapter narrates how Vaughan matriarchs attempted to preserve kinship ties in light of the significant geographical spaces that separated family members and the differences in socio-economic priorities of the various generations of the Vaughan family. In Chapter Three, the author uses the experience of a few Vaughan male letter writers to imagine how the formation of and participation in mutual aid societies became critical to fortifying friendship ties among missionary-educated Yorùbá men. These Yorùbá men molded such societies into safe spaces for discussing and performing actions vital to their communities' upliftment, enlightenment, and progress, especially towards the end of colonial rule. In Chapter Four, the author discusses how letter writers imagined their place in the "modernization" agenda that greeted Ibadan during the last two decades of colonial rule. These conversations happened in the context of significant financial stresses, health problems, and tragedies within the Vaughan family. Chapter Five is essentially a direct conversation between Abiodun Vaughan and his relations in Freetown about family well-being between 1956 and 1994.

These conversations demonstrate that family letters tell stories about how members navigate private challenges. They illustrate letters' usefulness in accounting for the role of emotions in the everyday experiences of colonial (and postcolonial) subjects. Family letters are raw and affective expressions of "worries of the heart" presented in a vulnerable space, that is, private family correspondence.

The author could have spent ample time disambiguating the meaning of "Yorùbá," as used throughout the monograph, especially for readers who might not know how it evolved as an identity and as a national consciousness between the 1920s and the 1990s. The author's deployment of the label suggests it was always stable and never contested among educated elites. This disambiguation is even more necessary because the use of "Yorùbá" as an ethnic identity was invented mainly by missionaries affiliated with the CMS. Also, when Yorùbá elites started to vigorously debate the extent to which the label could be deployed as an ethnic identity in the context of the Nigerian state, CMS-educated and CMS-affiliated critics were at the forefront of these debates.

Certainly, this suggestion does not prevent *Letters, Kinship, and Social Mobility in Nigeria* from being an excellent work. Olufemi Vaughan has done remarkably well in reducing an enormous number of family documents into a narrative that finds its footing in the historical landscapes of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria.

Indeed, this monograph should interest scholars working on kinship, elite formation, and social mobility in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

ibrahim Bàbátúndé Anóba 
University of California, Davis, CA, USA
ibanoba@ucdavis.edu

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