

REVIEW OF: JONES, REBECCA, *AT THE CROSSROADS; NIGERIAN TRAVEL WRITING AND LITERARY CULTURE IN YORUBA AND ENGLISH* (2019). LONDON: JAMES CURREY. PP. 298.

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Traveling has always been compelled by human curiosity of spaces outside their own. Travel narratives document movements made by travelers moving from one space to the other. William H. Sherman observes in “Stirrings and searchings (1500 – 1720),” in reference to the United Kingdom that,

Travel writing emerged as one of the early modern period’s most popular and flexible genres, and in a wide range of forms it educated and entertained readers, inspired national pride and commercial investment, and contributed to a public record of the world’s ‘markets, trade routes, personalities, and cultures.’ While the genre never settled into a single paradigm, most of the geographical locations, rhetorical forms, and political issues that we now associate with travel writing had appeared at least once by the end of the seventeenth century. As English travel hit its stride, authors and their audiences learned to write and read the world in books – with surprising speed and sophistication. (Sherman 20)

Subsequently, as time went on, it became clear that “as travellers made contact with new regions and peoples, authors and editors put the world on paper for the new print marketplace at home: the number of new titles published (and old titles reprinted) during the early modern period suggests that there was a significant audience for travel writing, eager to hear news of the wider world and to reflect on England’s place in it (Sherman 19).” However, in the course of these documentations, a lot of these Western travelogues that were written about Africa and its people portrayed them in most derogatory ways. It pointed at the lack of understanding of these foreign cultures and traditions. Mungo Park, the Scottish explorer wrote among others, *Travels in the interior districts of Africa: performed under the direction and patronage of the African Association, in the years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. Specifically, says Abubakar Abdullahi,

In the early nineteenth century, the activities and pursuits of Mungo Park and his fellow explorers of the African interior like Barth, Livingstone, Clapperton and Wilberforce, the Lander brothers, Stanley, etc., constituted and provided the main framework within which the continent is projected to the Europeans. These, in a sense, formed the basis upon which public opinion is moulded in the Western European mind. The exploits of Stanley in particular, being sponsored by the *New York Herald*, stands out as exceptional in its capability to influence European public opinion, knowledge and the consequent imagery of Africa. (Abdullahi 1991, 4).

These European travelogues’ depiction of Africans with whom they came in contact during their expeditions into parts of the continent created a need among Africans to rewrite those stories and explore their everyday lives and interterritorial encounters through travel narratives. This timely, and highly informative book, *At the Crossroads; Nigerian Travel Writing and Literary Culture in Yoruba and English* written by Rebecca Jones uses travel narratives written in south-western Nigeria to illustrate some of such developments. What makes this book unique is that Jones has provided the reader with a chronological history of the development of travel narratives that is fully grounded in the Yoruba language that is spoken

in the south-western part of Nigeria. The emphasis on Yoruba language travel narratives makes this book an important contribution to travel narratives written both in local languages and in the former colonial languages in Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

In Jones's book, the focus is on the development of Yoruba travel narratives between the nineteenth and twentieth century and its indebtedness to age-old Yoruba oral narrative traditions. Jones explores a theme that illustrates the Yoruba people's cosmopolitan interactions with people from all walks of life. The epicenter of the narratives explored by Jones is Lagos, in the south-western part of Nigeria which had already attained the status of a major African city with its melting pot of cultures and traditions brought by people from all walks of life, including the returnees after the abolition of slave trade among the European colonists as well as those former slaves and children of former slaves that were returned from the United States of America, Brazil, Cuba, and other parts of North and South America. While a lot may be made in current times of transatlantic migrations and travels in the works of a number of contemporary Nigerian authors like Helon Habila's *Travelers* (2019), Teju Cole's *Every Day is For the Thief* (2015), and others, Jones' book establishes these authors indebtedness to the travel narrative traditions laid down by early Yoruba authors of this genre, some of whose works have been explored in this book.

Jones' book is divided into seven chapters as she takes the reader on a journey from the nineteenth century till the present day. She educates the reader on the dynamics of the presence of a long tradition of travel narratives both in the Yoruba language and subsequently in the English language.

In Chapter 1, Jones acknowledges the role language plays in the development of literary narratives. In providing a historical background for traveling, Jones maintains that "southwest Nigeria has its own long and varied history of travel that we must therefore take into account when seeking to define 'travel writing' in the region. *Ìrin-àjò* (journeys) and *ìdàlẹ̀* (travelling) have taken different forms in the region's history. In the pre-colonial era, the region now known as Nigeria was traversed by traders travelling on foot, canoe and pack animals, who exchanged items from across the region, often ignoring ethnolinguistic as we know them today..." (Jones, 2019, 36)." This indicates that cosmopolitanism was a way of life for the people who have a long history of trading with westerners who landed on its shores well before the eighteenth century, earlier than the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. Jones indicates that travel has been an integral way of life of south-westerners in Nigeria. She associates Yoruba travel narratives with a form of historical narrative called *Ìtàn*, a Yoruba word which means "'spreading, reaching, opening up, illuminating, shining,' as well as its more common meanings of 'history' and 'story'" (Jones, 2019, 37). She contends that:

Although *Ìtàn* was originally an oral form, in the early decades of the twentieth century, intellectuals in Lagos and elsewhere in the Yoruba region began to publish written histories of Yoruba towns, known as *ìwẹ̀ ìtàn ìlú* (town histories), in both Yoruba and English. These texts share the name *ìtàn* and similarly document history, but they are not simply written versions of the oral historical form *ìtàn*. These local histories drew extensively on *ìtàn* in writing their histories, they but also moulded their new genre by making use of their own research, colonial records, treaties, petitions and letters, colonial and missionary travel accounts, eyewitness accounts and life stories, anecdotes, popular sayings and the works of other historians, and drew on the methods of classical European historiography (Jones, 2019, 37).

The interconnectedness between *ìtàn* and travel is therefore established as *ìtàn* narrates the events of migrations or travels from one part of the country to the other. Jones expatiates further that:

Between the 1850s and 1940 at least sixty-nine such histories were published, and by 1999 they were estimated to number over one hundred. Such histories lie far from what we conventionally consider travel writing. They are not first-person narratives, and they trace other themes besides travel as they narrate the histories of towns. But reading them as a potential form of travel writing in the broadest sense, while not making claims that they should necessarily be considered in dialogue with the genres of writing in its conventional sense, allows us to consider the relationship between travel and narrative in these foundational narratives of Yoruba history, and to ask where the limits of the genre may lie in terms of both forms of travel and genres of writing in the southwest Nigerian context (Jones, 2019, 37).

Against this background, Jones highlights the documentations of interactions between the Yoruba travel writers and the rest of the country that is also linked to travel in what was still the Yoruba land, in the nineteenth century, before Lagos became an annexed British colony in 1861 and it was joined to the southern protectorate by Sir Walter Egerton in 1906, after which the southern and northern protectorates were amalgamated by Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914. At the time, travel was undertaken mostly by European missionaries as well as Nigerians, who were in some cases also former slaves. The most prominent of them all was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a former slave who was freed by the British during an anti-slavery raid and brought to Sierra Leone. He worked both as a missionary as well as a traveler who accompanied expeditions across the River Niger as from 1841 and his travels have been chronicled and widely read as a relevant part of the travel writings of that period. Jones concludes that Crowther's travel writing "demonstrates the way that he was writing at crossroads of Western and Yoruba cultural concerns, languages and histories, adopting a Western genre of travel writing while also making it speak to his own intellectual concerns in ways that, as we shall see have reverberated in southwest Nigerian literary culture in the century since then" (49).

In Chapter 2, Jones focuses on other travel writings that were produced by fellow Yorubas who were either newspaper columnists or writers who sought to discover the country that is beyond the borders of the Lagos metropole. For, with internal developments through new roads, and better means of traveling such as railroad and cars also came the need to explore the inner parts of the country. Writing a five part serial called *Irin-Ajo Lati Eko Lo Si Kamerun* in the newly established newspaper in Lagos, called *Eko Akete*, an author who appropriately called himself Ajeji, which means stranger or foreigner in the Yoruba language published a non-fiction narrative of his travels to Cameroon. He mainly related his personal observations about places he visited during his travels. Other writers for *Eko Akete* also wrote similar travel narratives. One them was the journalist and newspaper editor, Isaac Babalola Thomas, a *Saro* or returnee who serialized the *Ìtàn Ìgbèsí Ayé Èmi Sègilolá Eléyinjú Egé Elégbèrùn Oko L'áiyé* between 1929-1930. He also published a series called *Ero L'Ona* or the Traveller for the *Eletí Ofe* newspaper. In these series, he "describes his three-month long journey on newspaper business from Lagos to Sapele, in present day Delta State" (61). These series ran for several years, "with further series appearing between 1929 and 1931 (and further into the 1930s, including series in 1934 and 1937), describing journeys to the nearby Yoruba-speaking region as well as to southeast Nigeria" (61). Others like E.A. Akintan published a serialized novel, *Ìtàn Èmi Omo-Orukan in Eleti Ofe* from 1926-30. "Akintan's fourteen-part narrative '*Irin Ajo Lati Eko Lo si Ilesa*' followed the form established by Thomas as he travelled across the Yoruba-speaking region and wrote of the people he met, his impressions of the towns, and the changes he noticed" (62). Other travel narratives that were written during this period showed a distinctive mixture of tradition and modernity. Given its cosmopolitan composition, most of these early travel writers that were also from Lagos, believed they were different from the rest of the country. "In accordance with this sense of their distinctiveness as Lagosians, the travel

writers represented themselves as first and foremost Lagosians in their travel narratives. Lagos was the place from which all their journeys started, and to which other places were compared” (74). This feeling of exceptionalism towards their fellow Yorubas in the interior is the underlying factor behind their travel narratives because they “imagine themselves to have a special role to play in translating ‘civilisation,’ the Yoruba hinterland and other places in the region to one another, while still revelling in their own distinct Lagosian social and intellectual world” (81). This exceptionalism is still present in contemporary Nigerian travel narratives.

In Chapter 3, Jones maintains that subsequent writers after Thomas et al, like Isaac Délà̀nò who published the *Soul of Nigeria* in 1937 further endeavored to draw attention to the diverse cultures and traditions, languages and mannerisms that were present in the newly formed British colony called Nigeria, from an intellectual perspective. Délà̀nò, “a Lagosian intellectual with roots in the Ègbá region of Yorubaland, used travel writing ostensibly to document long-held Yoruba ‘customs’ and ‘native ways,’ but also to chart a path for the Yoruba region’s future, in this ‘new world’ full of competing claims to ‘civilisation’” (91).

In Chapter 4, Jones’ research centers around the travel works of fiction by one of the most prolific Yoruba language authors, D.O. Fágúnwà. According to Jones,

Ògbójú Ode Ninú Igbó Irùnmolé (1938) is the first of five novels that established D.O. Fágúnwà as the most renowned Yoruba-language writer of the twentieth century. Although I.B. Thomas’ realist novel, *Sègilolá* was published nearly a decade earlier than *Ògbójú Ode*, it is nonetheless Fágúnwà’s fantastical novels that are often considered to have inaugurated the Yoruba novel tradition, owing to their widespread popularity and the perception that they capture a distinctively Yoruba mode or storytelling. *Ògbójú Ode* was followed by the novels *Igbó Olódùmarè* (1949), *Ìrèké-Onibùdó* (1949), *Ìrinkèrindò Ninú Igbó Elégbèje* (1954) and *Àdìtù Olódùmarè* (1961). (128)

This chapter focuses on three forest novels written by Fágúnwà that include *Ògbójú Ode*, *Igbó Olódùmarè* and *Ìrinkèrindò* which Ayo Bamgbose concludes to “appear to have been conceived as a trilogy and are more similar to each other than to the other two novels.” (128).

Fágúnwà also wrote a non-fiction book called *Irinajo* that centers around his visit to the United Kingdom as a guest of the British Council in the Post-World War II times:

Fágúnwà was one amongst many Nigerian intellectuals invited to Britain in this era; in 1943, for instance, *Akede Eko*, edited by I.B. Thomas travelled to the UK as part of a press delegation, and he described his stay in Britain in a serialised travel narrative in *Akede Eko* in 1944. Fágúnwà, too, wrote a Yoruba-language account of his journey to the UK, titled simply *Irinajo* (‘A Journey’ or ‘Travels’), and published in 1949 by Oxford University Press as part of a series entitled ‘Iwe Oxford Fun Ode Oni’ (‘Oxford Books for Today’). The series contained Yoruba-language stories and writings by authors such as Isaac Délà̀nò, J.O. Oyèlèse, and L.J. Lewis, and other stories by D.O. Fágúnwà—locating Fágúnwà as one of several key Yoruba intellectuals of his generation, echoing the positioning of Isaac Délà̀nò’s *The Soul of Nigeria* by a British publisher, a decade earlier, as offering a Nigerian intellectual’s own viewpoint on Nigeria (134).

In Chapter 5, Jones’ attention centers around authors of the post-independent era like Babatunde Shàdèkò who inherited the traditions laid down by the authors mentioned in the previous chapters. Shàdèkò’s non-fiction travelogue called *The Magic Land of Nigeria* is an account of his travels through “all the nooks and corners of Nigeria while working as a Federal Government Surveyor between 1969 and 1975 (159). Shàdèkò’s book “advocates for a move from ‘tribalism’ to patriotism. Shàdèkò attempts to frame the nation as a unified but

heterogeneous space, which every Nigerian is entitled to be everywhere – and about which anyone can read. Indeed, the book is dedicated to showing how through travel, Shàdèkò was able to become what he calls a ‘detribalized Nigerian’ (160). By advocating for a detribalized Nigerian society, his book “enables him to convey his own knowledge of Nigeria, gained through experience, to the reader who will, by reading the travelogue, become better informed about the ‘common bonds’ between Nigerians” (160). This chapter also highlights the act of detribalizing Nigeria that Shàdèkò advocates for that is found in the posting of Nigerian University graduates to locations across Nigeria for their one-year National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). NYSC travel narratives that were written include those by Damilola Ajénifújà’s *They Will Eat Me in Calabar: tales from the front lines of Nigeria’s National Youth Service Corps* (2000) and Chibuzor Mirian Azubuike’s *The Girl Who Found Water: Memoirs of a Corps Member* (2014). These narratives explore the notions that Nigerians have of their fellow citizens that are corrected through travels and living among people whose languages and socio-cultural traditions are different from their own.

In Chapter 6, Jones draws the reader’s attention to the more recent travelogues. These travelogues do not merely rely on the traditional mode of reaching out to their audiences; instead they make use of the social media whose bandwidth is much broader and reaches out to audiences across the world. The new crop of travelogue writers such as Peju Awofeso, whom along with a group of fellow writers, photographers and bloggers founded a domestic tourism project called ‘Travel Next Door’ whose aim was to “encourage Nigerians to view Nigerians through the ‘tourist gaze,’ and similarly understand in a new way as potential Nigerian tourists and travelers” (186). The internet offers these aspiring writers a huge space for them to establish themselves as travel writers. And, “sharing with Nigerian writers more broadly a sense of the possibilities the internet offers as an accessible space for publishing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a number of Nigerian writers have taken to travel blogging, alongside other forms of online publishing and internet based self-publishing” (186). This travel blogging which is also a digital diary based on their experiences on the road enables them to “envisage Nigeria as a tourist destination when blogging about their travels, or represent themselves enjoying travel for its own sake” (186). Subsequently, the Travel Next Door project’s perception of travel as a “‘tool to learn something new,’ its use of social media and online space, its reference to Nigeria and Nigerians, and its perception that it is doing something new, are characteristics of a generation of southwest Nigerian travel writers who have sought to explore both the country’s tourism potential, and the opportunities for travel writing and blogging in the early twenty-first century” (186-187). The most prominent among this contemporary travel writers and bloggers are Kola Tubosun, Lape Soetan, and Folarin Kolawole. Awofeso, the founder of the Travel Next Door’s website called Waka About published among others A guidebook to Jos called *A Place Called Peace* (2003). He also published *Nigerian Festivals* (2005), *Tour of Duty; Journeys Around Nigeria* (2010) and an Anthology called *Route 234* (2016). Similarly, Folarin Kolawole established a website called *NaijaTreks* in 2010, which focused on “sites of natural beauty such as waterfalls, hills, lakes and forests, but also feature towns and cities across Nigeria, principally the southeast and southwest of the country” (192). Kola Tubosun started a blog called *K Travula* while he was on a Fulbright scholarship in the US where he taught Yoruba. After returning to Nigeria in 2010, he maintained his blog and later wrote a poetry collection based on his travels in the US, called *Edwardsville By Heart* (2018). The Lagosian blogger and writer Lape Soetan who started blogging in 2011 has since upgraded her blog to a go-to Lifestyle blog that offers tips on life in Lagos, about life as a single woman, dating and marriage in Lagos. She self-published her most famous book to date, *How to be a Single Woman in Your 30s in Lagos* (2015) is reminiscent of the *Onitsha Market* chapbooks that gave survival tips on various aspect of living.

In Chapter 7, Jones singles out Adewale Maja-Pearce's *In My Father's Country* (1987) that "describes the author's return to Nigeria in its years of military rule, many years after Maja-Pearce, aged sixteen, left his childhood home of Lagos for the UK" (222). Maja-Pearce's book discusses the challenges of returning to a country that was still under military rule that also held painful family memories which were not welcoming to him at all. There have since been works similar to Maja-Pearce's recount of returning to Nigeria, such as Teju Cole's *Every Day is For the Thief* (2007), a work of fiction of which the author writes in the author's note that "I have sought to capture a contemporary moment in the life of the city in which I grew up" (230). And Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland*, is a rare excursion outside the scope of study in this book to the southeast part of Nigeria in Ogoni, Delta State. Like Maja-Pearce's narrative, it still has a "deliberately national scope, taking 'Nigeria' as its frame of reference while acknowledging the author's origins in a specific region of the country" (241). Saro-Wiwa's narrative, like Maja-Pearce recounts the pains of returning to a country of which was a symbol of personal pain to her. As the daughter of the writer, television producer, and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa who was sentenced to death and hanged in 1995 by the Nigerian dictator, General Sani Abacha for his fight against the environmental destruction of land and waters of his Ogoniland by multinational petroleum industries, she was already alienated from Nigeria that her family had fled after her father's death. She states that "I needed to travel freely around the country, as part-returnee and part-tourist with the innocence of the outsider, untarnished by personal associations" (242). All three narratives' similar theme of the returnee from abroad illustrate the struggles that authors of this genre encounter when they try to reconnect with their roots.

Indeed, Jones' book offers a refreshing insight into the wealth of historical travel narratives written by predominantly south-western Yoruba authors. This book opens a window into the dynamics of inter-Nigerian interactions through travels and explorations of the foreign in terms of food, language and cultural traditions within the same country. It is a book full of surprising turns that are worth exploring. Jones concedes that the travel narrative traditions established by some of the early Yoruba travel authors mentioned earlier on still serve as a guide for contemporary Nigerian travel narrative authors. It is a journey that often starts in *Eko akete ilu ogbon* (Lagos, the land of knowledge), the land of migrants, the land of great opportunities, the land where dreams are realized, and ends there. This book is highly recommended for classes in contemporary African travel studies and other related African studies.